

**Religious Education Support**  
*Professional Development Service for Teachers*

# TEACHING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION



WITHOUT A MEANING BEYOND THIS, NONE OF US CAN SURVIVE

REPORT ON JC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION COLLOQUIUM

NON-RELIGIOUS SOURCES OF VALUES

# Welcome TO ISSUE FIVE OF

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# TEACHING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

**FAREWELL** New beginnings are afoot for Religious Education Support. The service now forms part of the Cultural and Environmental suite of subjects in the newly configured Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). I am delighted to announce that Conor Harrison – National Co Ordinator of Cultural and Environmental subjects – has agreed to take on responsibility for the coordination and management of Religious Education Support.

In a sense, the Cultural & Environmental suite of subjects (History, Geography, CSPE, RE, Music, Art and the Classics) is the natural habitat for Religious Education Support. Each of these subjects falls under the overall management of Conor Harrison, while an Associate (seconded for a maximum of twenty days per year) looks after the day to day operation of the key aspects of support provided by each service – particularly the organisation of team training, the implementation of evening workshops and other support activities. Gary Carley, who previously worked on the RE Support Team as an Associate, has agreed to work as the main Associate for RE Support.

I wish both Conor and Gary every success in their respective roles in RE Support. It is a time of 'letting go' for me as I move on to my new appointment as Regional Advisor in Region 3 (south-east) in PDST. My work will take me into new territory, with generic support across both primary and post primary sectors as central to my new remit. I will miss my involvement in RE, although I have agreed of course to be available to both Conor and Gary to support and advise them through the first year of

the transfer of the service. I find great reassurance in the fact that RE Support will be in the most competent of hands, and I know that both Conor and Gary will bring the highest level of expertise to the service in the next phase of its evolution.

There are so many people who deserve my heart-felt thanks at this point – too numerous to mention. Forgive me if I name but a few: Nóirín Hynes & Stanford Kingston (former National Co ordinators of RE), Suzanne Dillon (DES Senior Inspector), Bernard Kirk (Director of Galway Education Centre), Paula Carolan (Director of Co. Wexford EC), Angela Thompson, Jackie Gibbons and Orla Walsh (RE Administrators), Teacher Education Section of DES, SLSS, the RTAI executive, the RE Support Team and of course the numerous teachers of JCRE & LCRE around the country who work tirelessly to ensure the highest possible standard of teaching and learning in RE. The journey from 2000 when JCRE was first introduced has in many ways been short. An enormous amount of groundwork which preceded the introduction of the syllabus must be credited to Nóirín Hynes and to Anne Looney (CEO, NCCA), Annette Honan and the NCCA R.E.

Course Committee. It is a great achievement for all involved in JCRE/LCRE to see the syllabuses embedded in schools and rightfully occupying their places on the curriculum in Ireland. The cliché 'A lot done – more to do' fits well at this time. The service will undoubtedly be different, but will continue to provide the highest quality of service to teachers and others who avail of it.

As I begin the next stage of my journey in PDST I thank all of you for your commitment to RE over the years and encourage you to offer your continued support to Conor, Gary, Angela and the RE Support Team as they work hard to provide an excellent professional development service in RE to teachers at a time of scarce resources. At the beginning of this new school year, may you know the value of the work that you do, and the importance of the way in which you touch and awaken young minds and hearts each day in your classrooms. May you be reminded often of the privilege it is to journey with young people and to help them to discover meaning and Truth, and to live in integrity and Love in all its various expressions.

I leave you with one of my favourite poems from David Whyte:

*Above the mountains  
the geese turn into the light  
again  
painting their black  
silhouettes on an open sky.*

*Sometimes  
everything has to be  
inscribed across the heavens  
so you can find the one line  
already written inside you.*

*Sometimes it takes  
a great sky  
to find that small, bright  
and indescribably wedge  
of freedom  
in your own heart.*

*Sometimes with the bones  
of the black sticks  
left when the fire has gone  
out  
Someone has written  
Something new in the ashes  
of your life.*

*You are not leaving  
You are arriving.*

David Whyte



Lorraine Gillespie  
Regional Advisor, PDST





Dear Religious Education Teacher,

Welcome to the new academic year! Very often at this time of year we talk about '*new beginnings*' as the new intake of First Year students grapple with all of the changes they are adjusting to in the new school. We teachers too have new beginnings as we commence teaching in a new school, take on new class/year groups, take on teaching new subjects. It's a time of energy, enthusiasm and sometimes trepidation! For me too it is all of the above as I take on the task of co-ordinating support for Religious Education.

I co-ordinate support for teachers of a suite of subjects under the banner of Cultural and Environmental Education for the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Over the past year I have been working with teachers of Art, Music, Ancient Greek, Classical Studies, Latin, CSPE, ESS, Geography and History and have really enjoyed the experience. I am delighted to add Religious Education to my brief and look forward to continuing to provide support for RE teachers over the coming year.

It is important for me to acknowledge the incredible support work that has been undertaken by Lorraine Gillespie, National Support Office for Religious Education, over the last number of years. She has worked tirelessly on behalf of RE teachers in her efforts to respond to your continuing professional development needs. Obviously, things will be different but we will endeavour to do our very best to provide as much support as possible under the new arrangements. I am very fortunate in having some access to Lorraine and her expertise this year, as she embarks upon her new role as a Regional Advisor in Region 3. I would like to sincerely thank Lorraine for her dedicated and committed support to RE teachers to date and wish her every success as she embarks upon this '*new beginning*' in her own professional development.

I very much look forward to working with the team of dedicated RE Local Facilitators as we plan and facilitate cpd courses for you over the coming year. I also look forward to working with you and to responding to your cpd needs as best we can as I embark upon this '*new beginning*' for me.

Wishing you every success with your own '*new beginning*' this academic year.

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# Both Religious Knowledge and Spiritual Wisdom: The Challenge for Religious Education as an “Exam Subject” in Irish Secondary Schools

## *A Thing of the Past or Coming to Birth?*

Prof. Thomas Groome

**Thomas H. Groome**, a native of Co. Kildare, is a senior professor of theology and religious education at Boston College, where he also serves as Chair of the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry. Internationally recognized as one of the most informed and discerning authorities on Religious Education, it is my deep privilege to publish Professor Groome’s paper here, which he very kindly wrote for ‘*Teaching Religious Education*’ – Religious Education Support.

Professor Groome argues here for the natural symbiosis of religious education and catechesis, enabling the teacher, with the appropriate pedagogy, to teach the formative in a deeply informative way. His argument recognizes the value of R.E. as ‘an exam subject’ which does and should mediate the curriculum in a way that is ‘likely to both inform and form students, bringing them to religious knowledge and to spiritual wisdom for life.’

I have fond memories of my religion classes at my Irish secondary school, Belcamp College, Raheny – now of happy memory itself. Fr. Dennis Burke, “Big Din” we called him, was our religion teacher (he also taught French and English) and we actually looked forward to Big Din’s class. He had an uncanny ability to choose topics that we found of interest, and not just the gratuitous ones for adolescent boys (sex and then sex again) but great issues, that he always posed as questions, like whether God exists; if so, why is there so much suffering in the world; and who was this Jesus fellow – really? Big Din would hold forth from the scriptures and tradition but also encouraged lots of conversation and good arguments. And there was “no pressure.”

Oh sure, there was a school exam at the end of each term and a religion “mark” would appear on your report home, but it never really counted – as for the Inter (now Junior) or Leaving Cert. Great conversations around ultimate questions that really mattered for life, hosted by a wonderful resource person and facilitator; no wonder I still have good memories. And beyond any nostalgia, I know for sure that Big Din’s class left an indelible mark on my life, on who I have become with the years. (Maybe even why I became a religious educator myself?)

Now that religion has become an “exam subject” for the Junior and Leaving Certificates, are classes like Big Din Burke’s *a thing of the past*? It is entirely reasonable for good people to wonder, and to be apprehensive about scholarly study diminishing the faith formation aspect of religious education. Is it even possible for a class to do both instruction in religion and formation in faith? Does making religion an exam subject force teachers and schools into an either/or choice between educating for religious knowledge or for spiritual wisdom for life; must we now say “one at a time, please.”

Making religious education solely an exam-driven academic study of religion(s) could have advantages, of course. For one thing, it would encourage a scholarly rigor that is nigh impossible to achieve otherwise. And students might learn a lot “about” religion, though the usefulness of such knowledge would be quite limited (unless one got on a quiz show and religion came up as a topic). Lost, however, would be a golden opportunity for both demanding study of religious knowledge and encouraging students to embrace great spiritual wisdom for their lives. Efforts toward the latter would be set aside or apart – perhaps to the parish – if done at all.

Though I reject such either/or thinking – precisely because we can and should do both - let me first recognize that it is a widely held posture in the scholarly literature of religious education. Many theorists seem to assume that religious education and catechesis (the favored Catholic term) or Christian education (the favored Protestant term) are two very different enterprises, and that it is far better to “divorce” the two.<sup>1</sup> Religious education is typically understood as the scholarly study of religion(s) whereas catechesis or Christian education emphasizes the formation in faith of its participants. (Wisely, and for reasons I explain below, our Jewish brothers and sisters have not embraced this dichotomy). And in some political contexts, this distinction may have been useful. For example, the British Education Act of 1944, making religious instruction a statutory requirement in every UK school, was based on the assumption that there could be an “objective” study of religion – without faith formation.

Now, however, post modern authors recognize the Enlightenment notion of “objective” and dis-interested knowledge as a false myth; false in that it is impossible to achieve and attempting it ill serves the humanizing purposes of education. Without going too far afield here, the dominant epistemic of the Enlightenment era leads to knowledge without a sense of ethic, to reason without a sense of responsibility, and presumed that there is “a view from no where” – as if knowledge can be independent of its context. This set up teachers to presume that they can teach any and every subject without influencing the “being” of their students. Why they would ever want to do so, of course, is a very good question; it seems antithetical to the vocation of the educator.

My own work in the theory and practice of religious education over the past forty odd years (since I embraced it as my life vocation while at St. Patrick’s College, Carlow, about 1968) has proposed a marrying rather than a divorce between religious education and catechesis or Christian education. I’m convinced that it is needed and possible to educate for both religious knowledge and spiritual wisdom, for education that both *informs* in religious traditions

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in ways that can -respectfully *form* the values and identity of its participants. It is possible to teach any great religious tradition a) with academic rigor and critical study, b) without indoctrination or confessional bias, c) and yet do so in ways that influence people's identity in that they *learn from it* for their lives rather than merely *about it* for their heads. Put more patently, in religious education the informative can be done in ways that are deeply formative while respecting, even promoting, students' freedom of choice; of course, so much depends on the pedagogy employed.

There should be no such thing as religious education that does not engage and shape people's lives, that does not lend them sources of spiritual wisdom for their journey. Conversely, there should be no catechesis or Christian formation that simply socializes people's identity but in a nonreflective, unquestioning, and uninformed way. At the interface of religion and education, these two emphases – information and formation, knowledge and wisdom – need each other; they can and should be held together, even as “an exam subject.”

Parenthetically, I note that at Belcamp – my old secondary school – Fr. Charles McGowan taught English much the same way that Big Din Burke taught religion. Oh, old Charlie got us ready for the public exams and most did well. But his teaching style also helped me to “learn from” reading Macbeth and Hamlet – about ambition and indecision, jealousy and generosity, betrayal and commitment, evil and goodness, and more. And Charlie had us read Yeats and the great poets in ways that helped us “to see” a little more of what should be imagined about life and ourselves, tempted us to fall in love with poetry (even now, I'm never without a poetry book beside my bed), and maybe even to write a poem on occasion. To Charlie McGowan, all great literature was a mirror in which we can recognize life a little more adequately and imagine ourselves a little more humanly. So maybe what I'm proposing for religious education is neither strange nor unique; perhaps it is no more than “good education” and what “good teachers” usually do, at least those teaching in the liberal arts and social sciences. All education, at its best, should enable people to “have a life” and not just to “make a living.”

While the Enlightenment movement left many positive legacies to human history, it bequeathed two negative ones that are relevant to our concern here. The first was its separation of epistemology from ontology, of knowing from being. The whole Enlightenment enterprise and thus modernity assumed that what we know need have little impact upon our “being.” (I mean “being” as both noun and verb, who we are and how we live.) In fact, the less the knower is personally engaged with or touched by what is known, the closer we are to scholarship. The second false separation was between reason and revelation, between “daring to think” over against the “burden of tradition” (Kant), as if critical thought and faith commitment are like oil and water.

### KNOWING AND BEING: A SYMBIOSIS

At one time, Western philosophy took for granted that what people know should affect how they live; conversely, their “being” in the world should shape what they know. So, the great founders of Western philosophy assumed that people's knowledge should both arise from and return to their everyday lives. Though Plato gave priority to the knowing side of the relationship, and Aristotle go the “being” side, both were convinced of their symbiosis; what we know should affect our identity, and our identity influences what and how we come to know. In fact, both were convinced that the only path to human happiness is for our knowing to form us as virtuous people. We could say that the old philosophers thought of information and formation as integral to each other. No wonder, then, that Plato's sense of the vocation of the educator is “to turn the soul” of the student toward the true, the good, and the beautiful.

We find a similar partnership between knowing and “being” throughout the Bible. In the Hebrew scriptures, “to know” and “to make love” are the same verb (*yada*), reflecting a deep symbiosis of mind and emotion. Further, the Bible names the seat of human knowing as the *leb*. Though usually translated as “heart,” we don't really have an English equivalent. The Hebrew *leb* includes what Western philosophy separates into three: emotions, intellect, and will. The *leb* is the center of affections (Psalm 4:8), the source of thought and reflection (Isaiah 6:10), and the seat of will and conscience (1 Samuel 24:5). For this reason, the whole tradition of rabbinic study never separated knowing from being, information from formation; in fact, the study of *Torah* was equivalent to the worship of God. This is likely why Jewish religious educators do not separate scholarly study from formation in faith identity.

The New Testament echoes the same union. John has Jesus explain that only by living as disciples can we come to know the truth – the kind of truth that sets free (see John 8:31-32). Later John states boldly that “the one without love has known nothing of God” (1 John 4:8). And the symbiosis between knowing and doing must be particularly present in the lives of teachers; about the commandments, Jesus says “whoever does them and teaches them will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5: 19, what a promise!). From the beginning, Christians were convinced that “knowing the faith” should lead to living it, and that to live it was the only way to truly know it. For Augustine (354-430), the outcome and measure of one's Christian knowledge is to become a lover of God and of others as oneself. Aquinas (1225-1274) was totally convinced that what we know should shape who we become. This symbiosis is reflected particularly in how he understood the partnership of intellect and agency; for Thomas true understanding should prompt the will to make good choices.

Western philosophy and indeed its theology did not maintain this ancient unity of knowing and “being.” At the beginning of the modern era, Descartes (1596-1650) confined knowledge to rational thinking, and severed reason

# To separate the critical study of religion from formation in faith is to abandon an ancient unity found in Christian tradition

from memory and imagination, in other words, from life in the world. At the pinnacle of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) tried to heal the breach left by Descartes but in fact deepened it by separating theoretical from practical reason. For Kant, the former attends to scientific reasoning, to objective reflection free of the personal interests and contextuality of the knower, whereas practical reason attends to everyday affairs, especially to ethical and religious matters. Thereafter, it was assumed that critical reasoning and “being” in faith are separate affairs. So, science now had no sense of ethic or social responsibility—landing us at the brink of nuclear annihilation—whereas faith was beyond the pale of critical reason.

Postmodernism helps us to recognize the dangerous dichotomies left by the Enlightenment. A common theme within this diverse literature is that our knowledge is always influenced by our context, that it should arise from and return to our cultural and social situations. What we know and our lives in the world are and should be deeply intertwined. To critique the modern separation of knowing from “being” and to propose their dialectical unity instead, the most helpful authors I’ve found are epistemologists who write from a feminist perspective. As I’ve reviewed elsewhere, feminist consciousness, for example, is keenly aware that knowledge brings responsibility, that to be informed should impinge on one’s very being.<sup>2</sup> And below I draw upon two more traditional voices that argue well for their unity, especially in matters religious.

## FAITH AND REASON: ANOTHER OLD ALLIANCE

To separate the critical study of religion from formation in faith is to abandon an ancient unity found in Christian tradition, and, as I’ve noted already, in Jewish tradition as well. Both have an enduring conviction that reason and revelation function best as partners, in fact they need each other; and that knowing one’s faith story in an informed and reflective way can be a powerful impetus toward living it. I offer the warrant from my own Catholic Christian tradition, but I know that as much can be said from other religious traditions as well.

At the beginning of the Church, there also were voices who called for a divorce; remember Tertullian’s battle cry that “Jerusalem has no need of Athens”—revelation does not need the critical thinking of the philosophers. But wiser voices prevailed. Beginning in the catechetical school at Alexandria in the second century, Clement and his successors began to forge a “Christian paideia” that wed faith and reason, theology and philosophy. A similar partnership marked the great theological enterprise of Augustine; his life work was to bring faith to understanding and understanding to faith. Likewise, Aquinas wrote: “just as grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, so sacred doctrine presupposes, uses, and perfects natural knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Further, Aquinas argued that real cognition reaches beyond understanding toward judgment and decision.

One of the boldest Christian statements of the partnership of reason and revelation was made by Vatican I (1869-70). It declared: “Faith and reason . . . are mutually advantageous. For right reason demonstrates the foundation of faith and . . . on the other hand, faith sets reason free and guards it from errors.”<sup>4</sup> From a the perspective of Christian tradition, reason and revelation should be partners in faith. Analogously, it would seem, so should religious education and catechesis or Christian education.

## DEFENDERS OF THE BOND AND HINTS OF A PEDAGOGY: NEWMAN AND LONERGAN

As noted already, postmodernism criticizes modernity’s separation of knowledge from life, and feminist epistemologists are working to reunite what Enlightenment philosophy divided. Here, however, I draw upon two more traditional voices as “defenders of the bond,” John Henry Newman and Bernard Lonergan; they also lend a segue toward a pedagogy for religious knowledge and spiritual wisdom. Of course, these two intellectual giants defy brief summary but we can draw a central point from each, arguing that the partnership is needed from both sides. For Newman would claim that catechesis or Christian education needs religious education if faith is to become “real.” Lonergan, on the other hand, would insist that authentic knowing of anything, including a religion, must reach beyond understanding it, to make judgments about its truth claims and then life decisions in light of what one knows. It is by judgment and decision that knowledge, of any kind, is likely to become wisdom for life. In sum, Newman would say that catechesis or Christian education should also be good education, and Lonergan that the best religious education is always formative. Lonergan would also add, religious education is not manipulative as long as it engages the agency of the knower, and encourages their own discernment and decision making.

*Newman:* In the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman describes “apprehension” as when people understand something for themselves; then, “assent” is a subsequent moment when we take a personal position on what we have apprehended. Within each, however, Newman distinguishes what is “notional” from what is “real.” They are interrelated, but “notional” is more something that we *know about* at a theoretical level, whereas “real” apprehension and assent means that what we know becomes part and parcel of us, affecting our very being—who we are and how we live. Such “real” apprehension and assent are essential for commitment.

For example, one can understand justice, be able to define its various distinctions, and even assent to it as required by Christian faith, but if one is to become just, to live justly, one must move beyond notional to real apprehension and assent. Further, real assent engages the whole person, intellect and affect, and most definitely requires that



knowers think for themselves. This is why Newman is remembered as a great champion of reason in matters of faith. For he was convinced that people must thoroughly investigate the beliefs and practices expected of them; we must bring all the resources of the mind to bear in matters of faith in order to come to real apprehension and assent. Otherwise we are not likely to be committed to living what we know.<sup>5</sup>

For our conversation here, Newman suggests that catechesis alone—understood as socialization without rigorous education—is not sufficient to promote the kind of lived commitments required by Christian or indeed by any faith. The latter—real faith—also requires study and reflection, questioning and probing, coming to see for oneself and to make one's own the faith tradition.<sup>6</sup>

*Loneragan:* Once asked to describe his life work, Lonergan responded, “to reunite what Kant separated”—in other words, to rejoin critical reason with human practice. To do so, Lonergan reached back into some rich treasures of the scholastic tradition, especially to Aquinas, to recast the dynamics of cognition as a holistic affair. In sum, Lonergan recognized in the operations of human consciousness a pattern of cumulative activities that all people perform in the act of authentic cognition, namely, attending to data, understanding it, making judgments about it, and then deciding what to do with it. Lonergan said that we can verify these dynamics within our own consciousness as existential subjects (i.e., human beings in residence) because we perform them a billion times a day. So I enter my office, and in the blink of an eye, I recognize its “data” – especially the desk and chair – understand what they are for, judge that they are calling, and decide to sit down - and go to work on this essay, which starts the cycle all over again.

The same dynamics should be encouraged by educators when attempting to bring students to “authentic cognition.” for to really “know” something, we must first attend to the data presented by our senses. Then we need to make sense of the data, moving to understand it. But instead of stopping there, we should push on to judge about the truth or falsehood of what we understand, and then, beyond that, to decide responsibly according to what we perceive as true and good. These four activities of cognition give rise to what Lonergan calls four transcendental imperatives, in other words, activities that everyone must fulfill in order to truly know and to know truly, namely “be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible.”

To the issue at hand, then, Lonergan says that for religious educators to bring students to authentic cognition they must prompt and encourage them beyond understanding the data of religious tradition(s)—*learning about*--and invite judgment and decision as well; the latter two dynamics encourages *learning from*. Put more patently, religious educators should invite people to make up their own minds about things and to make informed choices. And remember that Lonergan is arguing simply from the perspective of epistemology. In order to promote real cognition—and what good teacher would settle for less—religious educators must teach so that the “stuff” doesn't just go to students' heads as understanding, but reaches into their hearts and hands through judgments and decisions for their lives. This is another way of saying that religious educators should teach for religious knowledge in a way that enables them to appropriate as their own its spiritual wisdom for life.

## SO MUCH DEPENDS ON THE PEDAGOGY

Though each may have its particular emphasis, one on critical study and the other on faith formation, I've argued thus far that religious education and catechesis or Christian education should work in concert, mediating a curriculum that is likely to both inform and form students, bringing them to religious knowledge and to spiritual wisdom for life. That people can study a religious tradition without it affecting their “being” is undoubtedly possible; in fact, most academic theology is now so taught—the negative legacy of the Enlightenment at work. So, whether or not the partnership can be maintained within a religious education classroom depends in large part on the curriculum—both its *content* and *process*; so much rides on how each is done pedagogically. Let me make a brief proposal about both – content and process.

*The Content:* Though they must teach people to have knowledge of religion(s), religious educators should *approach all religions as traditions of spiritual wisdom* and teach them as resources for people's own spiritual journeys. In other words, don't approach them as value-free information only to be deposited in people's heads so that they *know about* the particular tradition. Rather, represent religions as traditions of spiritual wisdom that can be positive resources for people today. For this is precisely what religions are—when at their best – traditions of spiritual wisdom for life.

The great religions arose from the various ways that people have understood and lived out the divine/human covenant. As different peoples have experienced the Transcendent, they have developed diverse systems of belief, of ethic, and of worship—of creed, code, cult—by way of their lived response. All such efforts at being religious reflect spiritual wisdom; in other words, ways of putting faith to work in the everyday of life. By its very nature, then, study of any great religion demands more than understanding its data, important as that is; it must invite people to reach onward to discern what this means for life and to make decisions about it. Here I'm broadening Lonergan a bit beyond the typical meaning of “judgment”; in fact the better dynamic here is that people come to see for themselves, to discern about and evaluate what they are learning and how they might appropriate into their own lives, make its wisdom their own – if they so choose. And whether they accept or reject or nuance what they are learning, they need to figure out where they stand on it, to make a decision of some kind – cognitive, affective, or behavioral – if they are to “know” that tradition at all.

Christians and Jews find rich spiritual wisdom within their biblical faith. Both Testaments make clear that the community is to teach the faith handed on to them (see Dt 4:9; Mt 28: 19-20, etc.), and the biblical sense of the “intended learning outcome” of such religious education is *spiritual wisdom for life*. Now, the Bible's notion of wisdom is broad and deep; it evolves gradually from a life craft (Ex 31:6) to personification as the Craftsman who assists God in the work of creation (Prov 8:30). Overall, however, biblical wisdom is *integrity in living the divine/human covenant in everyday life*. The wise are those who live the covenant; the fools, those who break it.

Biblical wisdom is: *holistic* in that it engages the total person—head, heart, and hands; it is *lived* in the everyday of life; and it is *ethical* for it seeks what is true and does what is good. In sum, wise people embody their wisdom. Which is why St. Paul can describe Jesus as “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). Both Judaism and Christianity are eminently wisdom traditions.<sup>8</sup>

When Christian students study other religious traditions, they should also approach them as spiritual resources from which to learn life-giving wisdom. All people of faith need a thorough grounding in their own tradition, but then can be enriched in their own faith and identity by conversation with and study of traditions other than their own. The sacramental consciousness of Catholicism nurtured me well in a sense of God's presence in creation, in what Paddy Kavanagh called “the bits and pieces of everyday.” And yet my experience of the divine milieu of life was heightened all the more by encountering native American spiritual traditions. Or, again, I cherish the rich and varied prayer legacy of Christianity, and yet, the mindfulness encouraged by Buddhism has been a great gift to my life. How sad if I had only learned *about* those other traditions, if I had not had teachers who encourage me to learn *from* them as well.

## A PEDAGOGY FOR SPIRITUAL WISDOM

By way of a teaching process, we need a pedagogy that is likely to personally engage students, and that teaches them religion(s) in ways that highlight spiritual wisdom, inviting them to appropriate such wisdom and to figure out whether and how to put it to work in their lives. For many years now, I've proposed a pedagogy with such possibilities, calling it a "shared praxis approach."<sup>9</sup> I and others have written about it at length, it is now widely used in a great variety of contexts and cultures, and there is an emerging body of research to support its effectiveness; yet, it can be stated quite briefly. Essentially, a *shared praxis approach* is a teaching dynamic that critically correlates "people's lives" with "the spiritual wisdom of religion(s)." It enables students to *bring their lives to study a faith tradition, to come to know and understand it, and then to appropriate its spiritual wisdom to their own lives*; in brief, its pedagogy is a *life to faith to life* dynamic.

Shared praxis unfolds as a process of conversation and presentation that engages participants as active learners and contributors to the curriculum. It can be structured as a focusing activity and then five pedagogical "movements"—so named because they are totally flexible in sequence and combination. If a particular tradition is being studied—beyond religious phenomena in general—that tradition will qualify the process, so that it becomes a "shared Christian -- or Buddhist or Jewish or whatever--praxis approach."

A shared praxis unit can be crafted in myriad ways, across a great variety of time frames and contexts. Its "movements" rarely unfold sequentially, but often combine, reoccur, go back and forth, much like the movements of a symphony or dance. So, the first and second movements often overlap or combine, movement four may follow movement three, but then the conversation may revisit movements one or two, before moving on to five, which can become a new movement one, and so on. In fact, it is not the movements per se that matter but the pedagogical commitments that undergird them: to foster *engagement* and *conversation* by participants, to elicit their own *expression* and *critical reflection* around generative themes, to lend *access* to religious tradition(s), studying their data and seeking out their spiritual wisdom, to encourage students to *discern* and *decide* what they might learn from and do with such wisdom in their lives.

Their flexibility notwithstanding, the movements can help teachers to intentionally craft, resource, and facilitate such a process, suggesting what to ask and propose as the process unfolds. So, by its own logic, a shared praxis approach usually begins with a focusing act that establishes the curriculum in an engaging way, raising up a life or faith theme that is generative for these participants and correlates with the religious symbol being studied. It invites students to express the "data" from their own lives and contexts as they experience this generative theme (Movement 1). Then, it encourages their own critical reflection on the "present praxis" of the theme, engaging, as appropriate, reason, memory and imagination in personal reflection and social analysis (Movement 2).

In response to their reflection on praxis, the teacher now lends access to the story and vision of a faith tradition, helping them to learn its data (its story) but also being intentional to access the spiritual wisdom for life that they may find here (its vision). Regardless of the age level being taught, this instruction should reflect the best of scholarship to raise up both what students should know about it and might learn from it for their lives (Movement 3).

Moving back toward students' own lives now, Movement 4 is to pose the kinds of questions and activities that encourage students to reflect on and probe the tradition, to recognize the possibilities of its wisdom for their own contexts. Here the intent is that students come to see for themselves what this spiritual tradition might mean for their lives, to personally appropriate and make it their own, according to their discernment. Finally, Movement 5 invites participants to decision—cognitive, affective, or behavioral—lending students the opportunity to take this spiritual wisdom into their lives, to allow it to enhance their very "being" – who are and how they live.

Note that such a pedagogy encourages both critical study and personal formation, it is likely to both *inform* and *form* students. It can honor the intent of religious education to promote scholarship and free inquiry—holding its own as an "exam subject"—and, yet it honors the nature of religion as the bearer of life-giving wisdom for people's lives. It can do so without indoctrination or requiring confessional allegiance on the part of students or teachers. Indeed, students might choose a particular religious identity as the result of such a pedagogy, but the dynamic itself leaves this a matter of personal discernment rather than prompting or manipulating such a decision.

### For Example:

You are teaching a unit on *Gender and Christianity*.<sup>10</sup> You might focus the curriculum by a story, example, video, statistic or whatever gets students to focus on issues of gender as "real" for them. The key is to engage participants with it as a "generative theme"—something of genuine interest and import to their lives.

Movement 1, then, would invite students to notice and express for themselves their own and their society's and church's sense of gender roles, the instances of partnership and of hierarchical ordering, the moral values and disvalues that are operative in church and society around this theme. In other words, invite them to describe how they see or experience this theme, both their own experiences and attitudes, and what "goes on" in society – at least from their perspective.

Movement 2 would encourage a more in-depth analysis, looking at the influences that shape their own sense of gender roles and gender practices in their society and or religious tradition. Given the context, they would pay particular attention to the influence that Christianity has had and continues to have on both – their own and society's attitudes and practices.

Movement three will lay out the story and vision of Christianity – the stated curriculum – on the theme of gender. Here the teacher will draw upon contemporary scholarship that points to both a positive and negative legacy from Christian faith in this regard. Undoubtedly, Christian faith – its scriptures and traditions – has been used to legitimate gender inequality and sexist cultural mores. The teacher should teach an honest and critical review of such negative influences.



On the other hand, scholars also point to the justice and emancipatory aspects of Christian faith on this theme. For example, the Hebrew scriptures teach that both sexes equally reflect "the divine image and likeness" (Genesis 1:27), and are made for authentic partnership (Genesis 2:18). From the New Testament, note how Jesus had a deep commitment to gender equality (give examples, like his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, John 4), he welcomed women and men as disciples, fully including both in his community. Women, with Mary Magdalene in a leading role, were the first witnesses to what Christians believe to be Jesus' resurrection. Likewise, from the beginning Christian faith opposed prostitution, polygamy, and the enslavement of women, generally favoring their dignity and rights as persons.

Moving back toward their own lives, M 4 should invite students' own personal appropriation and discernment in response. Again this can be done in myriad ways as long as M 4 asks students, in one way or another, what are you coming to "see for yourself," to recognize, to make your own. Here, students are invited to put M1 and 2 in conversation with M 3. Possible questions would be: what do you agree with or disagree with or add, what do you recognize for yourself, what are you learning from this for your life and for our present situation as a culture, society, church or faith community?

M. 5 invites students to decision of some kind; cognitive, affective, or behavioral. So, the activities here should encourage students to take their own informed position on this issue, or to recognize how they "feel" about it now, after this study, or perhaps to make a practical and wise decision for their everyday lives.

Or imagine a unit on "The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text." The focusing act might "steal" a little from M 3, with the teacher giving students a brief review of this amazing book that has caused both war and peace, love and hate, fear and hope, division and solidarity for at least two thousand years. In other words, get their interest going to learn more about and from the Bible, regardless of their personal faith confession.

M 1 could invite students to express their opinions about the Bible and the typical attitudes in their context and culture. Here the teacher might ask where, when, and how they encounter this text; who has ever tried to read it, how did they fare, is its meaning obvious; why or why not? M 2 might invite them to probe deeper into present Bible praxis and where it comes from, e.g. why do you think it's been around so long; what have been some of its "fruits"--good and bad--over time; why do you think it can be both dangerous and life-giving; what do you think it takes to read it well and to mine its wisdom; why has it become at least a classic in literature; why do some people and communities carry this as a sacred text, and what does this mean; why do Catholics think of this as a Protestant book, and so on.

M 3 moves more obviously to teach what needs to be taught in this lesson about the Bible, responding to the conversation thus far (much of M 3 can also be done during the conversation of M 2), introducing students directly to the text, some of the story behind it, and the wisdom possibilities it has had over time and continues to have for our time. It would also make students aware of and encourage respect for the sacred texts of other peoples, presenting all such texts that have stood the test of time and shown their potential to be life-giving as sources of spiritual wisdom for people today. However, they are not inevitably so, but must be interpreted with care and caution. All great sacred texts have proved capable of promoting tremendous life, joy and peace and likewise the very opposite; so much depends on how they are read.

M4 returns to students' emerging attitudes and recognitions, encouraging respect for the Bible as both a living classic and sacred text, and also a certain caution in interpreting it. M 5 brings them back to "where are we now with the Bible?" It should encourage their own informed opinions about it, their sense of its value and possibilities for life, at least for people who take it seriously as a source of spiritual wisdom. They might even make a decision to try reading it!

Let me reiterate that this approach should be used gently, and held loosely by the teacher; the process is meant for the students, not the students for the process. Yet, it can help teachers to engage, facilitate, and resource a teaching/learning dynamic that enables students to bring their lives to study religious traditions, to learn about them and from them, to bring the wisdom of religious traditions to enrich their lives. I can hear Big Din Burke and Carlie McGown, both from the eternal presence of God, saying a resounding "yes, this can be done; we did it." Such an approach is not a "thing of the past" but one that can "come to birth" anew for religious education as an exam subject in Irish secondary schools.



<sup>1</sup> See Graham Rossiter, "The Need for a Creative Divorce Between Catechesis and Religious Education," in *Religious Education*, 77:1, Jan/Feb 1982

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Groome, *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000, esp. Chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, I, 8 ad2

<sup>4</sup> "The Constitution on Faith," in *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church*, John F. Clarkson, ed., Rockford, Ill: Tan Books, 1973, p. 34

<sup>5</sup> See John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame) esp. Part 1

<sup>6</sup> In terms of the stages of faith as outlined by James Fowler, catechesis or Christian education as a process of socialization would bring people to a stage three "conventional" faith—accepting what "they" say—whereas moving on to the owned faith of stage 4 and beyond would require some in-depth religious education.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, New York: Seabury Press, 1972, p. 20 and passim

<sup>8</sup> For a more complete statement of educating for spiritual wisdom, see Groome, *Educating for Life*, esp. Chapter 6

<sup>9</sup> I have described a shared praxis approach at length in *Sharing Faith*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991

<sup>10</sup> Both of my examples here are suggested by the Leaving Cert Religious Education syllabus.



Lorraine Gillespie

# Assessment for Learning in R.E.

Assessment may be described as the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and communicating information about all aspects of pupil progress and achievement across the curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Fundamental to assessment is the making of judgments about students' learning including, but not restricted to, the extent to which they have progressed in reaching and achieving learning outcomes. There are two key types of assessment that are commonly employed by teachers:

1. Assessment of learning
2. Assessment for learning.

**Assessment of learning** (summative assessment) occurs periodically across a student's schooling. Michael O'Leary describes it as 'any assessment used to make a decision about what pupils know or can do when teaching and learning is complete'.<sup>2</sup>

Examples of assessment of learning include a spelling test, class test, test at the end of a unit of work, end of year test, terminal examination. Students' progress can easily be tracked as results are produced in the form of marks or grades. The teacher is usually the person who conducts this type of assessment at regular intervals, and data on students' progress is recorded and usually fed back to students' parents/guardians through report cards and at parent-teacher meetings.

**Assessment for learning** (formative assessment) occurs on an ongoing basis and is structured into the very fabric of teaching and learning. It is about helping students to understand how they learn and empowering them to use that information to improve their learning. In effect this type of learning is fundamental to their life-long learning skills. It helps improve students' learning and teachers' teaching. Unlike assessment of learning, the students here are actively engaged in their own assessment activities as teachers share information with the learner about his/her learning, progress and steps for improvement. This also has the effect of shifting the emphasis onto the quality of learning rather than how students are performing against their peers. While assessment of learning involves a process of 'looking back' on what was learned, assessment for learning focuses on 'looking forward' to the next stage of learning, and how the student's learning can be further improved.

Although the two types of assessment are distinct they are also related. Where the learning intention and success criteria are shared with the students in assessment for learning, this contributes to assessment of learning.

Assessment for learning (AFL) is a planned activity. It does not happen by chance. Questioning is taken to a new level in the Assessment for Learning (AFL) classroom. Instead of a seemingly endless course of lower order questions which are posed by the teacher and answered by students (having first raised their hands of course to indicate their willingness to answer!), AFL promotes the use of more higher order questions, and the use of a 'talk partner'. This means that when the question is posed by the teacher, the students do not in fact raise their hands to respond. Instead, they are invited to discuss their possible answers with a talk partner. The teacher may choose any student at random to answer the question based on the discussion with his/her talk partner. As part of this questioning strategy students are often afforded thinking time / wait time, and may be asked to justify their answers, or develop a line of argument, or suggest possible consequences or some similar higher order activity. Some questions that we might hear in an AFL classroom could include:

- What might be important to consider if we created a sacred space somewhere in this school?
- What do you think it felt like to listen to Jesus telling parables about the Kingdom of God?
- How do you think it feels for a Muslim to participate in hajj?
- Imagine you were invited to give a talk about integrity and justice. What do you think would be the important issues to focus on? Why?

## Why is questioning so important in AFL?

Rather than passively waiting for others to answer the question, active learning methodologies engage the student with the question. 'It facilitates peer learning in that pupils get to hear the ideas and opinions of other children. It provides time for pupils to access and build on their prior knowledge.'<sup>3</sup> O'Leary also points out that in addition to being child centered, focused on active learning approaches, AFL is also consistent with social constructivist principles which underpin the curriculum. 'Well, child-centeredness I suppose, because children's opinions are valued. Active learning is there I suppose, because all children are required to develop a response and the social constructivist idea is because children have to work with others in accessing their prior knowledge and in constructing new knowledge.'<sup>4</sup>

## Key principles of Assessment for Learning

The following principles underpin the AFL process:

- sharing learning goals with students
- helping students to recognise the standards they are aiming for
- involving students in assessing their own learning
- providing feedback, which helps students to recognise what they must do to close any gaps in their knowledge or understanding
- communicating confidence that every student can improve
- adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment<sup>5</sup>
- The teacher sharing the learning intention / learning outcome for the lesson with the students. This may be written up on the board, for example, at the start of the lesson and explained by the teacher.
- Indicating the success criteria with the students. This enables student to recognize and grasp the standards that they are aspiring towards.
- Encouraging students' self-assessment and peer-assessment.
- Allowing both the teacher and the student to reflect on assessment data.
- The teacher offering constructive feedback to students on their learning and achievements. This involves for example, using 'comment only' marking. Instead of awarding a grade for students' work, the teacher offers some helpful comments on three areas of students' work. The teacher communicates to the student what s/he did well, where s/he needs to improve and how s/he can make improvements. Usually this involves identifying some aspects of the work which have been done well, and offering positive feedback on these. In addition, the teacher makes a suggestion on how the students' work could be improved. This suggestion is specific and open, enabling the student to see the next step which is necessary for learning, and equally important, guidance on how that next step might be taken. Students may be asked to review their work and identify where they have improved, or invite a classmate to do this with them, including his/her view. Comment-only marking does not preclude the awarding of a mark. For example, the teacher may record marks awarded for students' work and report these periodically to students (and they may also be useful to have for parent-teacher meetings). One of the kernels of comment-only

marking is that the student gets to focus not on a grade or mark, but on the content of the teacher's comments which will of course relate to the student's work and learning. This focus empowers students to assume greater responsibility for their learning, and leaves the door open for them to improve their work and re-submit if they choose to do so as agreed with the teacher. Students' learning about their own learning process is of course a life-long skill which can foster self-directed learning and greater engagement in learning.

### Planning, planning, planning!

Teachers are familiar with the importance of good subject planning. Increasingly we are aware of the need for members of the R.E. department to work in a collegial manner – and effective planning is of the utmost importance in this regard. Suggestions for the R.E. department's planning strategy might include:

- Develop a policy on R.E. Experience has shown this to be good practice for a variety of reasons. Taking into account the school's overall policy on assessment, the R.E. department might include its own subject policy in this regard. This could help agree and clarify the types of assessment procedures, the intervals of assessment, the content to be assessed etc.
- Consider introducing one or more elements of AfL into your classroom practice if you are not already consciously using AfL. Plan and discuss the implementation of this practice in a structured manner with your R.E. colleagues and others. Better still if there is agreement among colleagues to introduce one or more aspects of AfL simultaneously, and practitioner dialogue should be encouraged. Consider, for example, what is working well, what needs to be improved upon and how to bring about that improvement in the practice of AfL.
- Communicate – share your findings with colleagues and learn from your own practice and that of others. Gradually introduce more aspects of AfL and continue to evaluate individual and team progress. Be sure to adjust teaching according to judgments made about learning to date.

### What might comment-only marking look like in R.E.?

Here's an example of one student's answer to a homework question which is based on religious belief in Ireland today (JCRE syllabus, section D, part 1). Following on from the student's answer is some possible feedback from the teacher, ensuring that the three key areas are included (identifying what the student has learned well, any errors / gaps / omission in his understanding, and how he can improve his learning.

**Topic:** Religious belief in Ireland (JCRE syllabus, section D The Question of Faith, part 1)

**Student group:** Third year

**Learning intention:** That students will set out information on changing patterns of religious belief in Ireland, including changing patterns of religious belief in Ireland today.

#### Criteria for success:

Students will be able to:

- Identify evidence of religious belief in Ireland today
- Give information on how and why the pattern of religious belief in Ireland has changed in recent times
- Explore some of the main challenges to religious belief in Ireland today.

**Question:** Imagine you are preparing a talk about religious belief in Ireland today. Outline what you would say about each of the following points:

- Changing patterns of religious belief in Ireland today.
- Challenges to religious belief in Ireland today.

**Student answer:** *Today in our life we do not have as much religious symbols and icons in our household as our ancestors had, our grandparents and great grandparents.*

*In their life growing up as children they had a crucifix hanging on the wall in their bedroom. They had a sacred heart lamp hanging on the wall with a holy picture above it. There were small statues of Jesus and Mary and there was a holy water font inside the front door of every household. Today not many of these religious icons are present in the majority of households.*

*There are also many changes in religious practices. Our parents and grandparents all knew every prayer, "the Hail Mary," "The Our Father" etc. Every night in some households the family would sit down and pray the rosary together. Also there was at least one bible in the majority of households. Within the last hundred years mass has been changed to English from Latin, the priest said Mass with his back turned to you and the lay people had no role in the church. Everyone in church would kneel down for the priest to place the host on their tongue. People said private prayers instead of singing hymns and saying prayers communally. Women in Mass wore scarves on their heads as a sign of respect.*

*Within Ireland there is more than one challenge to belief. It is the violence in Northern Ireland with sectarianism between Catholics and Protestants. People in Northern Ireland are forced to hide their religious belief to avoid violence and being attacked.*

*Overall there have been many changes in religious beliefs in the last 100 years.*

#### Feedback for the student:

- A. You have given strong evidence of changes in religious practices, e.g. greater use of religious objects in the past, changes in the celebration of Mass etc. This shows a very clear understanding of some examples of how religious belief is put into practice in the past.
- B. You have correctly identified a link between sectarianism and the challenge to religious belief.
- C. It would be worth giving some examples of religious belief today – you focus clearly on how it was in the past, but what about religious belief in Ireland today?
- D. Could you suggest some reasons why religious belief, or how it is expressed (practiced), has changed since the time of your grandparents? E.g. are people today less inclined to have religious belief because they spend too much time on other distractions such as TV, internet, earning and spending money?
- E. What other challenges make it difficult for some people to have religious belief today? Think about people you know or have read about or seen on TV – what is it about our society and our lifestyles that can make it difficult to believe (e.g. do we rely too much on scientific explanations for everything?). Try to explore a couple of these challenges – where did they come from, what are people not relying on some of the religious beliefs like prayers etc?
- F. Can you go one step further and suggest how in fact many people still hold religious beliefs but are choosing to practice them in different ways because of some of the challenges to religious belief?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael O' Leary, Assessment for Learning, Podcast Transcription, <http://www.action.ncca.ie/en/podcasts>, accessed on 23rd June 2009, 21.00pm

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Post-Primary\\_Education/Junior\\_Cycle/Assessment\\_for\\_Learning\\_AfL/Key\\_principles/AfL\\_-\\_Key\\_principles.html](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Assessment_for_Learning_AfL/Key_principles/AfL_-_Key_principles.html)

# New Religious Movements

By Mike Garde

*Thanks to Mike Garde, Director of Dialogue Ireland Trust, for supplying this article on the theme of New Religious Movements. Mike has extensively studied this subject for the purpose of his MA research. Further information on NRMs is available from the Dialogue Ireland website.*

## Syllabus link

LCRE Section C  
World Religions

Topic 3.1  
Cults and sects

Section C, Part 3 of the Leaving Certificate R.E. Syllabus treats New Religious Movements - showing the complexity for both the teacher and the student in relation to naming names, or clarifying what is meant by a New Religious Movement, (NRMs) Cults or Sects. (see Leaving Certificate R.E. Syllabus, p. 39.) The Guidelines for teachers uses 'NRM' as a non threatening term also (see Leaving Certificate R.E. Guidelines for Teachers p. 40). This is an understandable conclusion considering that Ireland has no real studies on world religion or cult studies to develop a vocabulary of classification for the Irish context. The purpose of this article is to help the teacher and student to further their understanding in this field and to provide resources which can assist this process. The article will therefore be concerned to clarify the terminology used to classify the types and categories of groups generally referred to as *cults*, *sects*, and *NRMs*.

There has been an explosion of terminology in recent years and this has led to a challenging lack of clarity in both scholarly work and the popular media. The preferred term used will be NRMs. In stipulating this choice the work of Johannes Aagaard and Helle Meldgaard has been influential. In their view,

*The terminology varies. Some call them religions; some call them expressions of Spirituality. We call them new religious movements, thereby simply indicating, that these phenomena are new in the sense of timing, even if they have older roots, religious in their pretensions and practices, movements since most of them have not – yet – settled down as regular religions and institutions. ...The movements are not as new as we might think, but they are new in the sense that they are modern, for they are the children of modernism, even if they appear to promote 'the old paths'. Their religiousness is often questioned by their efficient and secular approaches to power and finances. The quality of movements of course depends on their ability to move.*  
(J. Aagaard and H. Meldgaard, *New Religious Movements in Europe*) (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1997)

It is important to note, however, that the term *cult*, despite academic resistance, continues to play a part in the popular understanding of *NRMs* such that its meaning also needs to be clarified. Here the term *cult* will be understood to refer to a tendency or mentality that can be observed in any organisation, rather than a particular form of group structure.

The Director of Dialogue Ireland, Mike Garde obtained his MA for his thesis, "Spirituality and Cultism: A case study of a New Religious Movement - The Magnificat Meal Movement." This thesis is available on line as resource to grapple with this subject.

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/03/09/discussion-around-cults/>

Chapter Two investigates and evaluates the question of terminology and its classification. This chapter uses an interdisciplinary approach to critically review what scholars in the field are saying. A new definition of *cultist NRMs* is advanced. This necessitates a move away from identifying groups or persons allegedly involved in *cults* in favour of the recognition of patterns of behaviour and human mentalities called *cultist tendencies* or *attitudes* that can be clearly identified and analysed. This new approach has clear educational, pastoral, spiritual and theological advantages. Going on to read the thesis will provide one with profiles for the exercise in 3.2 and a way of seeing the relevance. Also the new way of looking at this issue will make the relevance of manipulation and control not a question of identifying groups like Waco or Jonestown, but looking at what is happening around us. The term *cult* has been used in regard to the way a woman candidate in Dublin central was treated by her political colleagues and how the voting public responded.

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/06/19/789/>

Or the way the Anglo Irish bank operated could fit with in our definition.

Now we refer to *cultism*. This term names a mentality that can be found anywhere:

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/04/29/cults-are-not-just-religious/>

Inside the Churches:

(<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/05/10/a-story-of-cultist-attitudes-and-abuse/> )

The example of Colm O’Gorman and the abuse scandals in Ireland springs to mind. How could his religiously observant family have ever imagined that Sean Fortune, then a priest in good standing, could ever have done what he did to their son? Herein lies the core of the question in this and in other forms of spiritual and religious deviancy. At the heart of most such phenomena lies the reality of deviant or heterodox tendencies, mentalities and worldviews, and that *cultist NRMs* are best identified in these terms. It is to be noted that those who joined Debra, (the subject of the thesis,) were drawn from the most loyal elements within Catholicism; yet they found the capacity within themselves to give up all and transfer to Australia because of Debra’s influence and attraction. This suggests that at first it was the visions, then the sense of community, and then the appearance of being more orthodox than the Pope that attracted her followers. The fact that others were similarly attracted was supportive of a change of allegiance, even if this dynamic was not initially evident. More specifically in a Catholic context, it shows that it was the claim that she was the only one who was truly Catholic, along with the intangible elements and desires found in the make up of a follower, that became the magnet. We can see this phenomenon again in the House of Prayer on Achill and its founder Christina Gallagher.

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/category/house-of-prayer/>

<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/2009/06/11/cultist-attitudes-can-appear-in-any-group-including-our-own/>

We have argued in favour of a move away from reference to *cults* however well defined to one that favours the identification of a *cultist tendency* and/or *attitude* that can affect individuals, families, political parties, independence movements, businesses, and social groups. This identification of a mentality or tendency can now be applied to other religious, philosophical or human potential movements found in Ireland and elsewhere – a variety of groups to which people give allegiance.

### Why people join these types of groups?

There is no simple reason as to why one person joins a group and another does not. We have already noted how black and white thinking and the presentation of options in extreme terms attracts some people. In a period when some religious institutions are compromised and the authority of the mainline churches is suspect some people turn to visionaries and in some sense the more outlandish the claims the more the person is followed. We saw earlier how some find in groups a sense of community, and feel they are part of an authentic experience. Also in some cases we note that highly intelligent people are also attracted. Also it is my experience that people coming from dysfunctional families where addictions are found, where there is a lack of emotional intelligence, get involved. Then there are cases where no particular issues arise, they just are recruited because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Extreme examples like the London 7/7 and Glasgow Airport bombers show how induction and indoctrination can lead to a particular form of mind control which seems to alienate persons in a very short time and they become lost to their families and friends.

### Identify reasons why NRMs are on the increase

The cult of personality has been a planned feature of the last decade. Some groups were able use celebrities to make inroads into the artistic community. Secularisation has produced a reaction where some seek meaning in the transcendent, and as they have rejected religion, which is perceived by them as dead and lifeless, they find Spirituality is somehow more attractive and seemingly without boundaries and can lead to people embracing the divine in ways not known before. Some Irish people have left their families and gone into the jungles of South America and like Shamans take Ayahuasca, a hallucinogenic, mind altering substance. Mass travel and migration has brought different religious views into our monochrome world. The atomisation of life and the breakdown of community and move to individualism all point to more options and religious choice. In this mix there are cultist options amidst the rich tapestry of options available today. Also for some the cult can provide the enforced structure some need to survive.

### Who do they target?

Generally the bright, the young and those with money. Many gifted people give many years of their lives to movements without pay or just enough to survive. John Duignan in his book, “The Complex,” describes this process in great detail. Idealism which is misdirected is a common feature of those who join. They think they are involved in a programme of universal significance only to find that they are forwarding a sectoral and self interested project.

## What harm they can do?

Obviously some groups are more toxic than others, but some of the effects of these groups can be the loss of family in two senses. One would be one's family of origin, and the other would be that a person would give up marriage because Armageddon was at hand or have an abortion to remain in the organisation so that one does not become burdened by having to bring up children. Often the groups keep their members so occupied they have no time to think. Gradually they cut themselves off from their families, and the particular group takes over their life.

Some experience similar effects to those associated with **Posttraumatic stress disorder** (abbreviated **PTSD**.) Diagnostic symptoms include re-experience, such as flashbacks and nightmares; avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma; and increased arousal, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, anger, and hyper vigilance. Per definition, the symptoms last more than six months and cause significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (e.g. problems with work and relationships.)

Many of the apostates can't face that kind of pressure exerted by the NRM organisation; they surrender... like repentant sinners they creep back in to the arms of the organization. But what happens to people facing pressure, not willing to surrender and who leave?

1. They are totally ostracised and avoided- treated as dead.
2. They become disorientated through the loss of their beliefs and values.
3. The world outside the group is depicted by the organisation as a scary place to go after leaving.
4. Psychological trauma and in extreme cases suicide.

Often burn out and depression result from involvement and many sacrifice their own professional future to become a slave to the group. John Duignan spent twenty years in one organisation. He lost that time and is now trying to go to College and develop relationships twenty years later - what an emotional and intellectual loss. The CV of former members is a story of the development of survival skills developed in the cultist NRM and the sense of professional loss when they emerge back into the real world. They are a bit like those Japanese soldiers who emerged from the jungle not knowing the war was over thirty years later. They have the hope for normality and the realisation that the intensity of their former involvement will never be able to be fully recovered.

## What methods do they use?

Door to door visits, street recruitment where the person was contacted when they were vulnerable, or overwhelmed by the sales pitch. Use of advertising in regional papers contacts, infiltration with organisations.

## How do you develop critical discernment when encountering NRMs?

As in other areas of life, there are no simple ways to prevent membership of these movements. Some things to consider:

1. Recognise your vulnerability. Any of us can come under undue influence. Never respond when down to any offer. Loss of a relationship or family member etc.
2. When approached by the member of a group, do not allow them to claim your space. Take information, but do not give any - no contact details. Take the initiative and say 'I will get back to you IF I am interested'. Do not take up an offer of free personality test, stress test or free 'this or that'. Be assertive not aggressive.
3. Check the group out on google. If there is a neutral reading, then add the word cult or scam to find out more. Also check things out with a teacher or parent before responding to an offer to attend a free seminar or go to a party organised by the group.



## Resources

Some schools have modules on NRMs and Dialogue Ireland can provide advice on resources to be used in class. They also provide a two period presentation which is explained on the web site in the Services We Provide.  
<http://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/services-we-offer/>

Also our video library can be accessed directly from the internet for use in the school.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/DialogueIreland?gl=GB&hl=en-GB>

It is important to stress that the talk is an overview on manipulation and we normally approach the Principal in the school as it not only is presented in the RE slot, but as a general preparation for third level. We do not supplant the role of the teacher who generally presents a whole module on different aspects of this issue.

Below you will find our web site where you will find an A-Z of groups. You will also find links to other web sites. We generally provide connections to NRM groups believing it is important to allow the group we are critical of to have their web site accessible.

<http://www.dialogueireland.org/>

For more current material look at our Blog  
<http://www.dialogueireland.wordpress.com/>

Factnet  
[www.factnet.org](http://www.factnet.org)

The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)  
<http://www.icsahome.com/>

The Apogetics Index  
<http://www.apogeticsindex.org/>

Centre for Studies on New Religions  
[www.cesnur.org](http://www.cesnur.org)

US & World Religion Statistics - Church Statistics - World Religions  
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“Without a meaning beyond this,  
none of us can survive”

John Waters

It was my great privilege in recent times to have the opportunity to conduct an interview with John Waters about his perspective on the human search for meaning. Sharing profound philosophical insights here, John touches on the depths of the human search in modern culture and reminds us of the potential damage within culture to our true human freedom and from realizing the other dimension, the transcendent which is our origin and our true destiny – infinite reality. I am very grateful to John for sharing his personal and rich insights with us here.

#### Syllabus link

LCRE Section A  
The Search for Meaning  
and Values

Listen to the interview with  
John Waters by visiting the R.E.  
Support website as follows:  
[http://www.ress.ie/inservice\\_  
materials-nov-2009-2.html](http://www.ress.ie/inservice_materials-nov-2009-2.html)



*John Waters is a journalist for The Irish Times, playwright, magazine editor and columnist. He has specialised in raising unpopular issues of public importance, including the repression of Famine memories and the denial of rights to fathers. His books include:*

- *Jiving at the Crossroads* (Blackstaff, 1991);
- *Race of Angels* (4th Estate/Blackstaff, 1994);
- *Every Day Like Sunday?* (Poolbeg, 1995);
- *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Ireland* (Duckworth 1997);
- *The Politburo Has Decided That You Are Unwell* (Liffey Press, 2004);
- *Lapsed Agnostic* (Continuum, 2007);
- *Beyond Consolation* (Continuum 2010).

## Interview with John Waters (Transcript)

Conducted by *Lorraine Gillespie*

Date: 14th September 2009

JW = John Waters LG = Lorraine Gillespie

*LG: John, can I ask you first of all about the whole process of secularisation in Irish culture. Where do you stand on that – have you any reflections to offer on that?*

*JW: I actually think that the word 'secularisation' is actually not very helpful because really nobody's quite sure what it means, apart from a few who have a specific meaning for it. It's an ideological concept and because it's an ideological concept it's more about institutional concerns than it is about the reality of what's happened, because it's about questions of Church and State and dividing different areas to keep certain kinds of decontaminated areas in terms of politics or social policy or whatever. Whereas really the question that is signalled by the concept of secularisation for the individual is something else. It's about something that's happened to me as a human being in this culture and therefore it's something that affects this culture in a certain way. Therefore the word 'secularisation' doesn't help me because it's a very woolly, vague term. So I have actually invented a new word to describe the exact phenomenon so that people can actually see. And when I say this word it's a very bad word in a way because it's a clumsy word, but yet people invariably understand exactly the distinction. The word I use is 'de-absolutedisation'. And that's what has happened to me in this culture - I have been de-absoluted. I have been cut off from the idea of my infinite, absolute, eternal dimension and I have been reduced in culture, in this country to somebody who takes part in material society and civic society and political society in ideological discussions. I might even be, in a certain sense, a religious person – but that's still a narrow definition. These things are not connected to the infinite reality which is the only place I belong. So therefore, to talk about secularisation is really not very helpful. It's a problem that affects the Church maybe or affects politics or affects the society in the State. But how does it affect me? That's the way that it affects me – that I'm de-absoluted.*

LG: Are you saying then that we are de-humanised in modern culture, John?

JW: Yes, we are de-humanised. We are less than fully human because we are actually in a sense being made to crouch down in a constructed reality - constructed for political reasons, for reactive reasons because of cultural antagonisms towards religious structures, towards religious ideas. It's almost as if we have torn down the heavens above our heads and replaced them with a low ceiling which requires us to walk around with our shoulders hunched, our heads down. And we're incapable of living fully in the space that creation gave us. We're incapable of actually seeing a relationship between the stars and ourselves, between the heavens and ourselves. We live in this tiny material space all the time reducing to narrow questions of economics and politics and ideology. That's something we're not even aware of. We see this as a growth, as a progress - which is even worse. It's extraordinary that we have actually diminished ourselves and seen that reductionism as a kind of progress.

LG: What's blocking us, do you think, John? You mentioned reductionism. Is it to do with consumerism? Is it to do with materialism or is it something else?

JW: It's an inter-locking of various phenomena. Consumerism and materialism are elements of that. It's very hard to say what is the driving force - if there is a primary driving force. It's also very difficult to talk about this in terms of a cultural construction. Who constructed it? Is there an intelligence behind it? Does it have, as it were, an intelligent design? I would say that maybe it does, but it doesn't actually have to have. We don't need to be able to identify the room in which, ten or twelve or fifteen people met to decide all this and to set this all in train. Maybe those fifteen people never met. But it's as if they had - they have actually constructed something that exists in our culture now as a real phenomenon. So it has many ingredients. I mean certainly the way that the market has developed is an intrinsic element of it. The way I would put it is like this: that for people who have a sense of infinite correspondence for their desires (this is what it comes back to - my human desire) if I understand what that's for - that it's for something beyond this world - then probably I'm less likely to want to keep buying things. Because I have some understanding that these things are not going to satisfy me. So I suppose in a market economy (in an economic culture like we've created) - the idea of a transcendent belief is a little bit problematic. I suppose if you were a cosmic detective looking at these you would certainly say 'well that's an interesting piece of evidence that I need to put aside that circumstantially is going to be pointing me in a certain direction'.

But there are many other things as well. There is the question of authority, freedom - that we misunderstand the idea of freedom, because we again think that our desires to be free, which are natural and intrinsic to us, would find their satisfaction in the material work, if only all those repressive authoritarian dogmas could be taken out of the web - all those kind of institutional, disapprovals and judgments. We have resisted not just the question of religious institutions, but what they represent - which is the wisdom, the traditions of the ages so that we think these are all simply impositions on us and on our freedoms. That's another element of it. And there is the question of reason - that we have actually reduced our sense of what reason is in the interests of achieving this freedom and in the interests of achieving some kind of satisfaction in the narrow sense. We have become fixated on the idea that our satisfaction IS possible in materialism, if only we could remove all the impediments - if we could create the utopia in which none of these residual traditions, chivalous myths, beliefs were hanging over us, then we could be completely free. So all these things and lots of other ingredients all come together to create the motive and the opportunity for us to behave in a certain way. And we do. We all tend to do it together. We have created a culture which supports it, in offering us a reduced form of reason which excludes many of the most fundamental understandings of ourselves and of the world and of our relationship with the world and with reality in general.

So the whole thing is quite a dangerous construction culturally - very complex, very difficult to take apart and describe in words. I'm in the process of trying to do it at the moment, partly through a book I'm writing, but also because I think words are deceptive. Words let you down and you really can only make a stab at something in words,

because words are of themselves a technology which can become fashioned by an ideology. In effect, it's very difficult if you have a certain formula, certain idioms presented to you daily to understand reality. It can become difficult to actually see outside of those and to find new words to describe what you see, because our sense of perception is very much bound up with the technology of language. So there are lots of difficulties like that I think in our culture that we are not aware of precisely because the ideologies that we created and the culture that we've constructed out of those hides them from our seeing.

LG: John, you talked about the desire of the human heart, and what it is that humans need to transcend. Could you say a little bit more about what that means for you personally? What is it that we desire?

JW: I think one can go through life for a very long time and not be aware of this, or be aware of it only in a very sentimental sense. Even that phrase, 'the heart's desire' - it can become a Hollywoodised idea. Really we need to actually go back, go back, go back to ourselves and start asking. Because what happens is that when you go through life and you start to adapt and adopt the logic of the culture it leads you into trouble. This is what you find again and again. This is something in our culture that has become very much obscured and corrupted, particularly in my generation, because we had when I was only in my childhood the '60s revolution which really offered people the perfect idea of freedom based on permissiveness and based on licence to do as you pleased. This was its definition. And really it has taken me probably forty years to understand that this was wrong for me. I don't mean morally wrong, I don't mean ethically wrong. I mean it just didn't fit with my natural structure, that when I did the things that were suggested in that programme the results were not as I was told they would be. And when I looked around at other people I see the same is true. Even celebrities at that time who pursued this - Elvis - look at his story. Look at what happened to John Lennon. Look at what happened to Marilyn Monroe - there's something here about the reality of human structure and the human pattern and freedom. So there's something else. And what is that something else? I mean it's only when you go through a great deal of pain, of banging your head against that brick wall, trying to knock it down, that you begin to think, oh maybe there's something else, maybe I'm missing something. I went through that kind of experience through alcohol and had to go back to a fundamental sense of my own relationship with reality, which brought me back to the question of my smallness, my helplessness, my inability to influence reality beyond a very narrow set of circumstances. That opened me up then. I was lucky enough to encounter people who had been on this journey before and who had discovered certain things about themselves and who passed these understandings on and asked me to try this. So I tried it - an entirely different way. Rather than banging my head against that wall to actually turn around and look - look at the sky, look at reality, look at myself.

And this opened me up to a new idea of freedom - freedom based on the fact that my desire could not be satisfied in this realm, that my desires were infinite and therefore needed an infinite correspondence, that wherever the answer to my desires was it lay out there beyond anything that I knew, anything that I'd encountered, anything I could imagine. This opened up a new circuitry for me where for the first time in my life I began to actually look at things, look at reality, look at what was there in front of me and realise that actually I hadn't seen anything before really - that I had taken everything for granted, that I had always been looking for something beyond - but in the wrong way...that I was trying to go through everything to get to this thing when in fact what I really now understood was that I really needed to be still and realise that this thing was beyond there. It existed - and that by perceiving myself and perceiving my relationship with infinity through everything, through the world, through the beauty of the world, I could become whole as a person. It's very complex...you see the language of this is very difficult because it sounds a bit airy-fairy. But it's very concrete. I suppose philosophically it has to do with the fact that in our culture we've been taught to reduce everything, to see things as - whether they're just objects - to see things as simply self-explanatory, as easy as named things. We don't see the extraordinary nature of them when we look at them. And because we don't see the extraordinary nature of them we don't feel the extraordinariness of ourselves, of our own hearts. We don't allow our hearts to open up to the extraordinariness - to the wonder of the world. But when you begin to allow that to happen you are

transformed because you know your relationship with reality has changed completely - because nothing matters really apart from this. The material things don't really matter, the political things don't matter. Your income tax declaration doesn't really matter if you have this relationship with reality. It's a journey that you have to do, in my experience. There is only one way of doing it and that is the experience of pain. I don't actually think that's an absolute. I think that that's only necessary when you exist in a warped culture. I mean the culture I grew up in really directed all of us towards things like alcohol as being the answer. And because of that there was inevitably a great deal of pain. I think it's possible to create a healthy culture in which knowledge is correctly presented and in which human beings can probably reach this consciousness, this awareness - or something like it - relatively easily, without pain, without difficulty. But in ours it's only possible through pain, it's only possible through having exhausted all possibilities of freedom, and realised that they're all pointless, they're all, fantasies. Only yesterday - this is an aside - I read an article in the paper about a guy called Mick Taylor who I remember as a hero of mine as a child and Mick Taylor was like a god. He was a guitar player - played with the Rolling Stones through their best period and he was extraordinary looking, very handsome. But here in this article it described his life and it described him right now living in his shabby semi-detached house with no money. He hadn't got royalties for twenty five or thirty years, had fallen the victim of drugs back in the eighties, his whole life had been damaged by this experience. This again tells us something - that the ideals we have - even if you achieve exactly what our culture proffers you as the ultimate achievement, to be in the Rolling Stones, to be beautiful, to be attractive to women, ...whatever...to have money, - it's nothing, it can be reduced to a five foot ten pillar of flesh and bone who doesn't know the meaning of anything. That's the difference and this is the difficulty, and even being able to articulate these things is no panacea - that isn't enough. On a day to day basis you could remember them, you could be able to say these things and not be able to feel it, not be able to live it. It's beyond words, ...It's in your relationship with yourself and your relationship with reality. That requires a certain amount of thought, a certain amount of language, but mainly for the purposes of being able to see what is wrong with your present perceptions... what it is that is misdirecting, what it is that is misleading you about things. You know I find it now with my nephews and my daughter - I say to them about alcohol. How can I convey to them that this is not the answer, because the culture overwhelmingly tells them that it is an answer. And I say if you want to drink I can't stop you - not to my daughter now but to my nephews I say 'you know - drink - but just remember this...just remember that I'm telling you this now: there will come a point where you will say 'he was right. It's not the answer. It isn't what it promises to be. You're looking for something else, and this isn't it'. If you can remember that then you have one tool to use in beginning another kind of search. We've lost all this consciousness in our culture and if we talk about drink at all it's in such superficial, banal terms about drunkenness, binge-drinking as if they were this kind of phenomena that were dissociated from our culture and that they could be fixed mechanically by licensing hours or identity

cards or some kind of policies like that. Alcohol is a perfect metaphor in a way for what has happened to freedom and our culture because it is something that people attach themselves to as an expression of happiness, as an avenue of happiness - and it doesn't work - it's a disaster. It's the opposite. It turns into the opposite, and everything does in the material world.

*LG: John, what is the desire that, I think you're suggesting, drink is masquerading? What is it that we're really longing for?*

*JW: We're longing for the place where we came from, this is my understanding of things. As I sit here it's easy for me to fall into a remembered, learned understanding of myself. That I was born, I have a biological history, a family history and so on... I am a journalist, this is where I live and so on and so forth. I think I need to think fundamentally about myself. I'm fifty four years of age, so fifty five years ago I didn't exist at all except as a tiny organism. And in that moment I was in a kind of oblivion. I existed but in an oblivion. And in order to actually understand myself and understand reality I need occasionally to step back into that oblivion in my imagination to go back from where I am now, to step one step back, literally a yard back, from reality into the oblivion that I came from or rationally think I came from and say 'Ok, everything is shut out, everything is extinguished', and then to step forward again and look again at everything that's in front of me and ask myself: can any of this be taken for granted? Is any of it now obvious? Can I be taken for granted? You know, is my origin obvious? Is anything obvious? No. Nothing is obvious. This is extraordinary. In every living, waking moment this is the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened. That for somebody like me who has never won as much as a prize at a raffle at a fete or a sale of work, to be sitting here as one of six billion people on this planet which is hurtling through space among trillions and trillions of galaxies right at this moment ...I don't need anything more than this to know that anything is possible. Anything. And the idea that we have come in our culture to take all this for granted and to reduce it to a political reality in which we talk about NAMA and the Fine Gael party and these banalities...that this is reality? No. The reality is that I am here at this moment in space and time and this is phenomenal, and that I'm driven by this desire which is what keeps me awake, which keeps me going, which keeps me interested in everything - I want to devour everything, to understand everything. I've only got a short time here in this dimension. I've been sent by something. There's no other sense you know, because as a child I remember having this extraordinary feeling of wondering was I the only... it was a bit like every day I woke up I was waking up for the first time and I would look out from this body and think - I see all this stuff and I see other people moving, or what appeared to be people like me moving about. I didn't even know initially that they were people like me. But the strange thing was that when I actually said to them 'listen, have you this experience of wondering why it is that you're in there now at this moment in history?' they would kind of look at me strangely as if I... For a long time I used to think ah they*





must be robots because they don't have the same understanding of reality as I do, that it is strange that I'm in here. How did the world get by for all those millions of years without me being in here? Was somebody else in here and can I not remember? You know, in other words the 'I', the particularity of the 'I' – this is the key to, I think, our understanding of what's gone wrong in our culture – that we had forgotten about the 'I'. We have made everything into third persons, everything is objectified. We have forgotten that the world, the consciousness of the species, is defined by the 'I', by the person looking from inside here out at reality and seeking to comprehend it. All wisdom really comes from in here, all understanding comes from in here. Knowledge comes from out there, but wisdom isn't just knowledge. Wisdom is something else. It's a meeting point between the information and the consciousness that apprehends it. I think what's happened our culture is very strange, that the more we've learned to talk and to tell each other things, and the greater technologies have become at disseminating this discussion, the more reduced has become our sense of what there is to talk about. This is the phenomenal thing: that the more communication there is, the less we communicate about ourselves. So the desire is really this voracious appetite for everything which defines me, which is potentially lethal to me and everybody else if I don't learn about it. But it is for the place I come from and to which I'll go back to in some shape or form.

We can go beyond all that then into the whole Christian thing. I have a very specific set of beliefs in that area but in a way they're not all that relevant or important, because they're my perceptions, my understandings and somebody else will have different ones. The important thing is that that is my access route to this knowledge. So that as a Christian, my understanding of reality is that it is imbued with the immanent presence of Christ who came here in this singular event in history two thousand years ago in which God made himself visible to man, made himself part of the human race in order to redirect us as to the correct way of perceiving reality and understanding reality and seeing ourselves in reality. No more than that. He didn't come to teach us rules about sex or anything. He came here to teach us about reality. And we've kind of forgotten that. We've forgotten that really it's not about how we behave first of all. It's about how we relate, how we enter into reality, how we look at reality, how we see ourselves in reality. When we wake up in the morning what do we understand about ourselves? And more and more I think our culture has reduced everything because of this constant, ubiquitous voice that tells us how things are, what is important, how we should feel, what we should think, what we should be afraid of. You know...swine flu. Turn on the radio for the last three mornings: swine flu. I mean maybe three or four people in Ireland have died of swine flu. Every year thirteen hundred people die from alcohol in Ireland and we won't talk about it. But we're obsessed with swine flu. There are many things like that that are absurd, which are no more than clues to the general absurdity that we have actually created about ourselves and which we have reduced to an obviousness ...it's obvious. I can take myself for granted. I can discount myself completely and then simply start talking about the political system, the economic system, the banking system. These things are all secondary. They're peripheral to my relationship with reality which is absolute and which will endure as long as I do, regardless of how much money I have in the bank, whether I have a roof over my head. This is the real story of my life. It's fundamental. It's essential and there's no place to talk about it any more because religion is discounted, is discredited, because philosophy has become an abstraction - it's not even about angels on the heads of pins any more. It's about atheists on the heads of pins. It's terrible. What's happened to us is pretty awful. Nothing could be worse than what's happened to us in a way. We've lost our bearings in reality and we have really come to see ourselves as no more than a succession of mechanistic entities who happen to walk through this dimension for a period, and then disappear off the edge. And the thing is, leaving aside the truth or otherwise of anything, that if we continue to believe in this we will actually have no reason to go on. Because ultimately without a meaning beyond this none of us can survive. I believe that it's the case that no society, no atheistic

society in the history of the world has survived beyond two or three generations. That's it. Now leaving aside the questions of right or wrong, or good or bad, or God or not God, this is a real mechanistic question, a technological question for the human race you know. I think it's this kind of question: how do we create the motivation to get people out of bed in the morning to continue living, to want to live, to have something to live for, without this ceiling that we've constructed continuing to bear down upon us until it crushes us to death? That's the fundamental question for humans in our civilization now, I think.

*LG: And for you, John, where would you say is the source of hope in all of that, because potentially what you describe is a very nihilistic kind of stance in the world, so what gives hope?*

*JW:* Well I think the condition of the world is nihilistic. Yeah, I think that the culture of the world has become nihilistic. I think the only hope is for us to begin to waken up to ourselves and in a Christian society I think this means waking up to Christ because Christ is the correspondence. Christ is what represents culturally for us the correspondence for our desire. There's nothing else culturally that we can imagine that could be in any way used. I'm talking purely technocratically now – I'm leaving aside the question of the authenticity of belief in anything - but that Christ in our culture is become the correspondence for our desires and in the absence of Christ our desires are all over the place. They're settling on all kinds of things and they're creating craziness in us.

So we need to begin to first of all understand, to start talking about things, start making connections. We need to stop – we need to re-examine our concept of reason because one of the great problems has been that a very reduced form of reason has become ubiquitous so that very stupid people have the capacity to define reality for us on the basis of un-thinkingness and on the basis of lack of knowledge or lack of reflection and to bully everybody else into sharing this perspective. We need to open up those questions very much, particularly the question of the 'I' and this witness that I have as an individual human being that my uniqueness and my concrete 'I-ness' has a validity. Because if that doesn't have validity, nothing has. Because if I talk about the world as if I didn't exist in it, as it might be when I've left it, or as it was before I arrived, I have actually contributed to something fatal for the world. Because unless I contribute my 'I-ness' nobody else can. No body else has the same right. Only by doing that do I allow other people to waken up to say 'Ah – yeah, I too – me too – I have this. I have this witness.' This is what's important – not in a selfish way. Quite the contrary. Once you begin to understand this it becomes a very unselfish thing. It is a very profound philosophical question in one sense, but that sounds a little bit abstract because it's very, very real. It's about literally what we see when we look at something, how we see each other, how we think about each other, the language we use. All these things are all constructs which prevent us. They're like partitions which we've built all around ourselves, which direct us in certain ways and away from other things, and fundamentally away from understanding that there's an absolute truth about us that if we don't as human being reopen the circuitry between ourselves and infinity, between the infinite reality, unless we knock down this ceiling we've constructed, open ourselves up again really as a species we'll die, we don't have a future because as St. Augustine says, 'You have made us for yourself and we're lost unless we rest in You'. In a way anything you say which is religious, immediately you say that you run right into the culture problem where it sounds like a piety, it sounds like some kind of sanctimony. The language is archaic. It sounds like I'm trying to convert people to some kind of breast-beating piety, sanctimony. It may be the fact is that this is the nature of human beings that this is how we prosper. This is how we best function as human beings, is when we are connected. I only discovered this as a result of bouncing off that wall. Well with the question I found myself unable to kneel, unable to humble myself because I had this idea that it was about humbling myself before an authoritarian God. It took a long time for me to understand that actually the condition of humility is right for the human being, not

because of the authoritarian or ego-maniacal dimensions of the deities but because of me. I need to understand my place in reality: that I'm in a sense nothing, but that I am protected, I'm dependent, that this is the ideal state for me. This is a consciousness which is impossible to communicate now in our culture: that actually by being humbled we become stronger. And that's the source of human strength, not control. I can't control anything and if I try I'll kill myself.

So it's very complex. There really are very difficult questions, even if we had a free language, by which I mean even if the language was completely neutral the fact is that the language we are using has been constructed to obscure these realities. So how can you actually use it to describe them, to make them visible? You can't. It's almost impossible. But despite that each of us has a heart, each of us has a desire and each of us recognises this desire in another person. This is what poetry is for in a way - is to re-awaken the desire in each of us. This is what Patrick Kavanagh understood... that he would speak in a certain code and no matter how derelict the culture and no matter how ideological the culture has become you can communicate heart to heart and you can open up somebody. We need to begin to try and heal our culture in these ways so that poetry can go back to being that, so that religion can go back to doing what it should be doing instead of becoming a moral police force in society. Very slow - but first of all we need to recognise that we've reached a point where this journey back is essential in the same way as I did. But I don't know. We probably have a little bit further to go before we reach that point. If we've come through the recession which we've come through now and still the penny hasn't dropped, you can imagine that it will take one hell of a calamity for us to begin to understand this. But I don't see another way. I don't know if you can talk people around any more than if someone said to me when I was twenty one 'this drinking is bad for you. You know you should stop it.' Sure yeah! You know, so long as there's scope for this particular pursuit of freedom, we'll continue to pursue it. It's only when we run out of road that we begin asking questions of ourselves.

*LG: And John, finally, could I ask you one other question, because you seem to be very connected with reality and with mystery really. When you look out at reality - you talked about the particularity of the 'I', do you see a spark of the divine in the reality that you encounter?*

*JW: Oh Yeah. That is the thing. I mean more and more I find this now awakening in myself, that beauty is an order, you know. This is the resonance that I find. I mean what is beauty? If you think about it in a nihilistic way there should be no such thing as beauty. Why should a particular ordering of features in a landscape or in a face strike me as being what I call beautiful? I mean there's no rational, reasonable basis for that. And yet we all know what beauty is. And so more and more I kind of see the beauty of the world and quite subconsciously I find this thing rising up in myself, this awareness that is beyond words that this beauty is given for a purpose, that it didn't just sort of erode into shape, and that my own consciousness eroded over time to what ever Darwin or Dawkins or any of these guys would tell me through natural selection that I became attuned to a particular formulation. No. I mean it's not conceivable. I certainly have read nothing that would convince me that this can all be a random accidental confluence of events and signs. So this is one of the things that I more and more see that there is something...It makes me dizzy to think that this planet is hurtling through space and I'm standing on top of it, and that everything is still capable of stillness and beauty. This is staggering. How can I take that for granted? How can I take it for something that came from nothing? That doesn't mean that I have a very simplistic view of heaven, that up there in the clouds somewhere is a kind of an apartment into which I will be allowed go. No. I don't know what God is. I don't know what the other dimension is. But I do know that all I need to know is that I have a particular journey in this life and that there's nothing to be afraid of beyond, that I can step off the precipice at the end of this life and be sure that there is something waiting that is better. That seems to me to be an entirely reasonable deduction from everything that I know and everything that I see here. And any kind of rationality, so called, that seeks to interfere with that it's not so much that I reject it...I don't reject it. But I listen to it and now I have the capacity to de-construct it and to put back to the other person the question 'but how do you know?' What is the meaning of this word that you use and you seem to understand so perfectly? You say to me, this word 'tangible'. Well, ok, I say what is tangible? How do you measure the tangibility of something? Is it purely what you can weigh or count or*

is it something you feel? Is it something that corresponds to the desire in your heart because that is to me the measure of everything. That is the only reasonableness there is really. If something corresponds to my desire then even if I don't understand it, it has a reality far beyond anything that I can measure or count or weigh. And so that's the nature of the change that happens. But you're fighting on a daily basis, on a moment to moment basis, a culture which seeks all the time to reinforce in you and me a different understanding of myself and of everything. With every word, on a page of a newspaper, every word in a radio programme, every word in a television programme, every word of advertising as I walk around the street, the language that has been given to me by people I meet, the assumptions that they have, the way they divert me away...Not all the time, but occasionally, very occasionally somebody will come out, as Patrick Kavanagh said you know and blab, in spite of everything they'll say. They'll pick up one word or one phrase that I said and I know that there's been a resonance, that they're coming out, as it were. And that's the thing, to actually know that there's a different way of seeing everything... that you can actually look at a human being and see two different things. Walking down the street you can see somebody on their way to the office, dressed as a consumer, as a commuter, as a worker, and hurrying to catch a bus. Or you can stop and say 'no - this is a human being who is like me who is here at this instant in time on a journey. They come from somewhere. They're going somewhere'. The bus is incidental. But the shape, the demeanor that they're taking is their natural demeanor. They're waiting for something. And so we have to look through everything - even each other - to see each other. It's like there's this false screen in front of us that the culture creates and we have to be able to see through it to what's beyond.

*LG: John, thank you very much. You have given us loads of food for thought there and I think there is going to be lots of exploration in Irish classrooms after listening to your interview. If you had one final thing to say to students in Religious Education classrooms, have you any particular thought that you'd like to impart to them?*

*JW: I think the most important thing is if you have a question, it's a good question. There are no bad questions. There are lots of bad answers but there are no bad questions. Ask the question. Repeatedly ask it. Contrary to everything you've been told religion is not about laying down the law. It's not about telling you how you should be. It's a challenge to you to be yourself - completely yourself. If it's not doing that it's not doing its job, it's not right religion. So there's nothing to be afraid of, there's nothing to be hostile towards. This is an invitation to an infinite openness towards reality. That's all it is. And if it's not that then reject it. Say 'no'. By all means say no, but be sure that you're doing that from the position of your infinite openness, not from some misconceived idea of freedom which is going to lead you in ten, fifteen, twenty years to disaster. Open your heart to what it is, to what reality is and then ask all the questions you like...*

*LG: John Waters, thank you very much indeed.*

*JW: Thanks very much, Lorraine.*



# RELIGIOUS EDUCATION LOCAL FACILITATOR TRAINING

*Eimear O' Connor – R.E. Local Facilitator*

*Thanks to Eimear O' Connor for this account of recent team training for members of the R.E. Support Team. Eimear is an experienced teacher of Junior and Leaving Certificate R.E. and taught until recently in St. Peter's College Dunbooyne. We wish Eimear well as she begins her new role as Chaplain in Tullow Community School, Co. Carlow.*

On a very foggy day at the end of January, an excited crew of Religious Education Local Facilitators made their way to the Education Centre in Athlone. The agenda – to introduce us to new ICT methodologies, websites, software and the very mysterious sounding 'cloud' or Web 2.0! The session was led by Fred Boss a CPD facilitator for the NCTE<sup>1</sup>. Lorraine Gillespie (NSO) and Angela Thompson (RE Administrator) were also in attendance. Among those present, levels of expertise in the area of ICT varied; some knew how to put together a PowerPoint presentation, others had their own web pages. I use the past tense here deliberately!

The day began with a look at some useful websites and e-links to ease everybody in gently! As the morning progressed, we were shown the advantages of using advanced searches (when looking for information on the Net), how to save entire web pages (including content) so that they may be used offline etc., and how to download and insert video clips into PowerPoint. For me the most valuable part of the morning was the discussion on the fair use of images and video clips in our lessons. I would imagine that there are few teachers, who, at some point or

other, have unknowingly (or knowingly!) infringed copyright law in their classrooms. Religious Educators are probably the group most susceptible to this as they struggle to keep the students interested with up to date music, films and images. We explored at length ways of finding and using material (that isn't going to land us behind bars!!) and really importantly, how to encourage our students to be discerning in the material that they use in their own work. Personally, I thought it was going to be very difficult to find copyright free alternatives to the images, clips etc. that one might usually use. This is not the case. We were introduced to resources available from Image Bank, Flickr, Wikimedia and Creative Commons. All it takes is a little time and know-how and we can all be responsible in the material we use in class.

In the afternoon, things stepped up a gear! We learned how to make Web Quests, how to use Hot Potatoes, Quandry and Photo Story<sup>2</sup>. We were introduced to Web 2.0 (Podcasting, Wiki's, Blogs, Facebook, Twitter etc.) Over the past number of years, with the widespread availability of broadband in Ireland, Web 2.0 has really taken off. The focus of Web 2.0 is sharing, collaborating and creating content online<sup>3</sup>. I know this was the area that many of us resolved to focus upon in greater detail as really the potential here for creating exciting virtual learning environments and enhancing our teaching and our students' learning is endless. We now have our own R.E. wiki so that the team can collaborate online, share our ideas and edit our work before it gets to the stage



*R.E. Support Team hard at work!*

*Back row - L to R: Ailish Hayes, Karen O' Donovan, Caitríona Smith, Sheila Zietsman, Aisling Reigh, Brendan O' Regan, and Alec Mc Alister (SLSS).  
Front row - L to R: Mary Burke, Marianne O' Reilly, Ray Mc Hugh, Sinéad Mannion, Mary O' Sullivan.*

of readiness for R.E. workshops in the form of support materials. The NCTE offers excellent advice on its own website for teachers wanting to find out more about Web 2.0.<sup>4</sup>

Many of us left feeling a little overwhelmed but I can say with confidence that each and every one of us came away from that meeting with a whole new range of skills and - more importantly - feeling inspired to try these new ideas in our classrooms and in the facilitation of R.E. workshops. Follow up training took place in Kilkenny Education Centre on 24th April when we had a chance to work collaboratively on various tools such as Animoto and Voicethread – both of which have enormous potential in the R.E. classroom. We look forward to practicing these skills and tools and to maximising their use in our own classrooms and in future R.E. workshops.



*Me! (Eimear O' Connor) & Ray Mc Hugh. Happy, happy, happy!!*



*Brendan O' Regan – our ICT whiz-kid*



*Caitríona Smith – always with a smile on her face.*

Below are comments from local facilitators who attended ICT training in R.E.

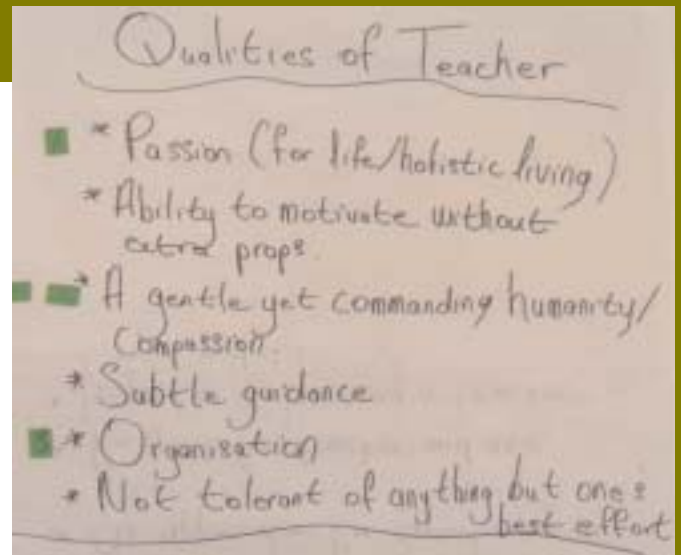
*"The recent ICT training day in Athlone offered the teachers present a myriad of approaches in relation to using ICT in the classroom. Even though I am relatively computer savvy, I wasn't really prepared for the wealth of material encountered - blogs, Web2, Hot Potatoes, RSS feeds were a number of new, exciting but ultimately daunting list of items covered over the day. That said, I think everyone now agrees that any teacher in the 21st century needs to have a decent working knowledge in this area to reach out to students who are often more acquainted with this particular sphere. At the moment, however, I am extremely fortunate to be working in a school which has excellent IT resources - sadly, the exception rather than the rule in a lot of cases. As regards the day itself, the session was adeptly facilitated by Fred Boss, who dealt with our numerous queries with liberal amounts of patience and expertise. The challenge now is for schools to be equipped with both the resources and the knowledge/training to implement and utilise the types of methodologies these opportunities present."*

*"I found the ICT training session very helpful, as it pointed me in the direction of resources I wouldn't have otherwise been aware of. Regarding what I was actually able to apply in the classroom, I have set up my own wiki page which I plan to use to consolidate and publish all material for the Journal work project. I was particularly interested in the Encyclopaedia Britannica access and, while I haven't yet started using it, I can definitely see myself using this in the classroom. From my own perspective, I would use ICT in the classroom quite frequently, whether playing a downloaded podcast from a particular radio programme of relevance or showing a TV or video download which is relevant to the aspect of the syllabus I would be teaching at the time. Armed with the knowledge from the course, I now have extra resources which will allow me to broaden my use of ICT in the classroom."*



L to R :

Sr Ena Quinlan, Micheál de Barra and Ailish Hayes



Our reflections on some of the qualities of a good teacher.

The ICT training workshops were preceded by training in presentation and facilitation skills. Alec Mc Alister from SLSS facilitated an excellent workshop on helpful facilitation techniques which can enhance the quality of interaction in groups. He encouraged us to reflect on our memories of a 'good teacher' from our schooldays, and to consider what it was about him/her that made him/her 'good' or memorable. This exercise offered great insight into our own classroom practice as we reflect on our own teaching styles, as well as encouraging us to implement something memorable and valuable into our workshop facilitation. Lorraine also identified some of the 'do's' and 'don'ts' of facilitating R.E. workshops, paying particular attention to issues of inclusion, bias, Assessment for Learning and the shift in mindset from sometimes talking 'off the cuff' as we might in our own staffrooms to mindfulness of our professional duties in our role as facilitators of CPD for teachers as professionals.

All in all, the training to date has been extremely helpful and beneficial to team members both for their own classroom practice and for preparation for CPD facilitation. We look forward to further ongoing opportunities to develop our skills in this area and encourage those who have a genuine passion for teaching JCRE / LCRE to consider sharing their expertise with others as part of the R.E. Support Team of Local Facilitators.



Mary presses on as Sinead files her nails!!  
(Only kidding!)



The Golden Girls!  
L to R: Katherina Broderick,  
Mary O' Sullivan & Ailish Reigh.!!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> National Centre for Technology in Education

<sup>2</sup> All of the software programmes mentioned here are freely available and can be found using your internet search engine.

<sup>3</sup> NCTE Introduction to Web 2.0 Tools

<sup>4</sup> <http://NCTE.ie/web2learning/>

# A 'hands on' introduction to Leaving Certificate Religious Education Coursework 2010

Sinéad Mannion

Thanks to Sinéad Mannion for this article on how she approaches LCRE Coursework. Sinéad is a member of the R.E. Support Team and an experienced teacher of Junior and Leaving Certificate R.E. at Moate Community School, Co. Westmeath.



Throughout this article I intend to share some of my teaching experience and research ideas which both the students and I have found useful and motivating as a classroom teacher of Leaving Cert. R.E. coursework material. My 6th year students who sat their exam in 2010 had chosen as a group to explore the following coursework title:

*'Research the connection between the way people worship and the roles of men and women in one of the above major world religions today (Islam).'*

## INTRODUCTION

In order to introduce the students to the area of coursework, I would begin by referring to the Coursework section of the *Leaving Certificate Religious Education Guidelines for Teachers*. Students would be informed that the coursework is worth 20% of the overall Leaving Certificate Religious Education mark. Here are some techniques I would use in beginning the exploration into the chosen title:

### 1. Analysis of the key words and phrases in title:

- The first word instruction is always key to engage with any title such as this one. 'Research' implies that the student will find **suitable information, sort, record, analyse and draw conclusions** (see pg 130 *Department of Education and Science Leaving Certificate Religious Education Guidelines for Teachers*). 'Connection' – connect the way people worship in Islam to the roles held by men and women within this worship. Worship – The act of adoration, the paying of religious reverence, as in prayer, praise etc. Roles of men and women – A part or function played by men and women.

### 2. Syllabus requirements relating to chosen title:

Section E. Religion and Gender –

#### SYLLABUS REQUIREMENTS

*Section E. Religion and Gender – Part 1 Gender, Society and Religion*

Objectives (p52 of syllabus)

#### Knowledge

- Be aware of the roles of women and men from the perspective of a variety of religious traditions and the connection between images of God and understandings of these roles.

#### Understanding

- Have an understanding of the significance of gender for personal, social, and religious experience in contemporary society.
- Have an understanding of the dynamic nature of gender roles.

#### Skills

- Trace the development of the role and understanding of gender in religious traditions, in particular the Christian traditions, through the ages.
- Recognise links between the roles of women and men in society and their roles in religious traditions.

#### Attitudes

- Critical awareness of the differences in practice between some religious traditions in relation to gender roles.



## Part 1 Gender, Society and Religion

*The place of women and men in the sacred texts and living traditions of different religions (Topic 1.2)*

### Outcomes

- Present a comparison of gender roles in two different named world religions.
- Make a connection between gender roles and images of God/the transcendent associated with each world religion and give one example of the relationship in each (Outcomes LC RE Syllabus p 53).

### 3. What is worship in Islam?

In Islam, any good act done in the spirit of worship is an act of worship. Such acts as removing a stone from the road, teaching a child the alphabet, or even washing the dishes after a family meal are acts of worship if done in the Name of Allah.

- More formal types of Islamic worship include:
    - The Five Pillars of Islamic Faith: **Shahada** (Profession of Faith), **Salah** (Prayers), **Zakat** (Giving of Alms), **Sawm** (Fasting during Ramadan) and **Hajj** (pilgrimage to Mecca) Dawah, teaching about Islam, reading, reciting, and memorizing the Holy Qur'an, and other collections of Islamic information
    - Rites of passage, such as the aqiqah (naming ceremony for a new baby), the wedding, and the azza (a gathering after someone has died.) Islamic festivals - **Eid ul-Fitr** "Festival of the Fast Breaking", which marks the end of the month of Ramadan **Eid al-Adha** "Festival of the Sacrifice" which is celebrated to commemorate Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son for God, Worship at the Mosque, Visiting the sick.
1. *Gender role:*  
Gender role is the set of social expectations based on gender stereotypes of how a person should act, think and feel based on their actual perceived sex (pg 30 Sandra Cullen 'Religion and Gender' - Into the Classroom series, Veritas)

2. *Student handout containing basic 'Do's and Don'ts' when carrying out coursework:*

Here is a basic instruction guide which I designed to inform the students about good practice before preparing to fill out their RE Leaving Certificate Coursework booklet:

## Leaving Cert. Religious Education Coursework 2010

Chosen title 2010: SECTION E: RELIGION AND GENDER

### • Islam

Research the **connection between the way people worship and the roles of men and women** in one of the above major world religions today.

1. The most common cause of mark loss in the coursework area is simply due to students misunderstanding of the title OR not referring to the chosen title constantly throughout their work. One way to ensure that you engage fully with this title is to ensure that you understand the chosen title and that you keep your entire coursework focused on that title. This should be reflected in the writing up of the coursework booklet.
2. **KEY WORD** = Research in the title. NB. Research implies that the student will find **suitable information, sort, record, analyse** and **draw conclusions**.
3. All good research will involve drawing upon an extensive and varied choice of information sources i.e. not simply the Internet research and library research. Interviews, surveys, comparisons between your sources, research and different perspectives are all recommended ways of engaging with the title. This is important to portray such an extensive and wide use of sources **PARTICULARLY** at higher level.
4. Each source of information must be directly linked to the title.
5. Show a depth of understanding in relation to the title.
6. Show instances of personal and critical reflection throughout your work.
7. It is crucial that you make reference at the relevant times to the skills that you have developed throughout the coursework i.e. observation skills, reflection skills, research skills, enquiry skills, communication skills, problem solving skills, organisational skills etc. The skills are named in the Teacher's Guidelines and you will see them also in past marking schemes. NB. Again, ensure that each skill is linked to the title.
8. You must be able to interpret, contrast and evaluate different opinions/approaches to a topic.
9. You should be able to distinguish between fact and opinion (use both specifically where asked). Be careful not to give a general overview of your world religion and worship. This is not what is being asked of your research. All that the examiner needs to know relates to the question i.e. Islamic worship and how this is connected to the roles of men and women (see title key words underlined at top). Do not waffle! Know exactly what you need to put across in relation to bullet points of criteria listed in parts A and B of the coursework and stick to that.
10. Higher level students should show their engagement with the title by making information their own
11. The format of your coursework (i.e. the layout) should be in order. I would suggest that your paragraphs, or headings if you wish, should be consistent with the bullet point requirements asked of you. You may also skip a line between each new idea or paragraph to enhance clarity.

12. In order to make the most of your space within the booklet, keep your writing neat and tidy. Portray development of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes already built upon throughout the entire syllabus, particularly section E.
13. Share your research sources with others in your class. Discussing the different methods of research that work for individual people can really help in your coursework. However, be warned not to have too much of another student's influence on your coursework research. The examiners deal with plagiarism in coursework/project work such as this very seriously! Your coursework must be your own piece of research. At this level, you are expected to produce an extremely interesting and very well researched./documented piece of work.
14. Become familiar with previous years' marking schemes, particularly the bullet points which indicate the criteria for success for an 'excellent' answer. Learn from these and apply this learning to your own coursework.

**Resources:**

- You should pay close attention to the list of websites given to you to support your religion research in all areas. By exploring these sites you will find some useful information relating to your title.
- A general search engine like 'Google' or 'iol' etc. will be beneficial provided that specific/key words are used in your search (eg. How is Islamic worship connected to roles of men and women? OR The roles of men and women in the ways in which they worship etc. etc.).
- Library books are also very helpful in relation to your title (Please see select bibliography on this title for examples).
- Surveys
- Media
- Interviews and visits where possible
- Case Studies etc.

**Syllabus Outcomes (pg 53)**

*The place of women and men in the sacred texts and living traditions of different religions (Topic 1.2)*

- Present a comparison of gender roles in two different named world religions
- Make a connection between gender roles and images of God/the transcendent associated with each world religion and give one example of the relationship in each

**NB. Make sure to connect Islamic worship to the roles of men and women throughout the coursework.**

**SOURCES**

I have included the resources used by my class in their research of this coursework title. These are also the sources I have used in compiling this piece:

**Books**

- Interviews
  1. Interview and tour with Ali Selim at the Islamic Cultural Centre Clonskeagh, Dublin.
  2. Interview with Dr. Roja Fazaeli (School of Religious and Theology, Trinity College Dublin) to gain female Muslim perspective.
- Library research
  1. Class visit to Mater Dei library in order to research library books relating to our title (preparatory work for this visit can be carried out at [www.materdei/library/](http://www.materdei/library/) ).
- Surveys

1. 6th year students constructed surveys to be completed by Transition Year pupils who had just studied Junior Cert. RE. The aim of this research was to gain insight into the level of knowledge the students' peers had in relation to the roles of men and women in Islamic worship. Here were some of the questions asked on the survey:

- List four examples of Islamic worship (i.e. ways in which Muslims revere or pay respect to Allah)
- Muslim men and women pray together during prayer at the mosque:  
True  False
- The Hajj pilgrimage requires the same duties of Muslim men and women equally:  
True  False
- The Qur'an views the roles of men and women as equal:  
Agree  Disagree

Explain your answer

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- According to the Qur'an, can the religious leader of the mosque (the Imam) be a female?  
Yes  No

- Can you name any famous/high profile/influential Muslim men? If so, list below.

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- Can you name any famous/high profile/influential Muslim women? If so, list below.
- Do you think the roles of men and women are equal in Islamic worship? Explain your answer with reasons:

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### Books

1. 'Religion and Gender' - Sandra Cullen (Veritas)
2. *The Holy Qur'an*
3. 'Faith Seeking Understanding' – Sec C World Religions (Ellen Moiséle) edited by Micheal De Barra (Veritas)
4. Department of Education and Science Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus
5. 'Women in Islam' – Jean Holm & John Bowker
6. 'Religious Woman – Contemporary Reflections on Eastern Texts' – Lardner Carmody, Denise
7. 'Women and Gender in Islam' – Ahmed L. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)
8. 'A Lion Handbook – The World Religions' (New Revised Edition)

### Websites

- [www.ress.ie](http://www.ress.ie)
- [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (search Hajj pilgrimage videos and Amina Wadud)
- [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com) ('Deeply attached to three million strangers')
- [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) ('Women in religious life', Shirin Ebadi)
- [www.livingislam.org](http://www.livingislam.org) (Amina Wadud)
- [www.quantara.de](http://www.quantara.de) ('Can Women Be Imams?')
- [www.gender.org.uk](http://www.gender.org.uk)
- [www.socialpsychology.org/social.htm#gender](http://www.socialpsychology.org/social.htm#gender)[www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com)
- [www.womenshistory.about.com](http://www.womenshistory.about.com)
- [www.religious-podcasts.net/](http://www.religious-podcasts.net/)
- [www.religiousresources.org](http://www.religiousresources.org)
- [www.bbc.uk/education/humanrights](http://www.bbc.uk/education/humanrights)
- [www.sacred-texts.com](http://www.sacred-texts.com)
- [www.islamicity.com/mosque/zakat](http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/zakat)

### RESEARCH

#### Male and female roles in The Holy Qur'an:

The Qur'an addresses men and women equally, with the same duties being required of both:

- Sura 4 of the Qur'an is entitled 'Women'
- "It is good deeds and awareness of Allah that makes the believer, male or female, noble in the sight of Allah" (Sura 49:13)
- Sura 33:35 and 3:195 also address the role of women
- According to one commentator: "The Qur'an offers both sexes moral and spiritual equality" (Kassam, 2001, Islam)

#### Roles in Islamic prayer:

- The Mosque – women worship in a separate balcony area. Mosque attendance is compulsory on Islamic Sabbath (Friday) for men, but not for women
- Dress – Code of modesty for both men and women in mosque
- Images of God – In Islam, to speak of God in images is blasphemy (Allah transcends the masculine and feminine. 'Allah' has a grammatically feminine ending in Arabic)
- Religious Leadership – According to the Qur'an, either male or female can be an Imam

#### What is the role of the Imam in the Sunni mosque?

The word Imam means "In The Front." The Imam is viewed as a spiritual leader. The Imam's major role in the mosque is to lead prayers. The Imam is the person who stands in front of the lines of worshippers in the mosque and faces the Qiblah, leading the worshippers in prayer.

Generally, the Imam teaches Arabic and is knowledgeable about the Qur'an, Hadith's etc. Apart from leading all of the prayers, the Imam usually takes on other tasks such as a local community leader to answer Islamic questions etc.

#### Some influential female Muslim religious leaders around the world:

The following are some high profile Muslim women who have highlighted the issue of gender roles within and outside of Islamic worship. These women have put Islamic women at the fore on a worldwide scale, for their campaigning of gender equality in all aspects

- Amina Wadud (New York professor) who caused controversy in 2005 when it is thought she became one of the first Muslim women to lead mixed Friday prayers (See [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk), [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org), [www.livingislam.org](http://www.livingislam.org) and [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com))
- Ibu Alfiyah (Iranian female Muslim preacher) a social activist particularly interested in women's rights (See [www.livingislam.org](http://www.livingislam.org))
- Shirin Ebadi (Iranian lawyer and human rights activist) was the first Muslim woman to have received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her significant contribution to women, children and refugee's rights (See [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org))

### Did you know?

- In Germany with a 3,000 strong Muslim population there are only 13 female Imams ([www.quantara.de](http://www.quantara.de))
- A growing number of female Muslim preachers are appointed in Turkey to senior positions ([www.quantara.de](http://www.quantara.de))
- The Progressive Muslim Union of North America addresses the issue of Islamic gender equality ([www.livingislam.org](http://www.livingislam.org))
- Rahima is an Indonesian women's organisation which advocates women's equality ([www.quantara.de](http://www.quantara.de))
- The journey of the Hajj pilgrimage requires a woman to be accompanied by a male. This is to ensure that travel is made easy for the woman so that the male can carry heavy belongings during the various Hajj rituals ([www.helium.com](http://www.helium.com))

## COURSEWORK PREPARATION

The following is a handout I have prepared for students to guide them in the filling out of their coursework book. Each part (i.e. Parts A and B) is clearly outlined according to the bullet point stipulation in the booklet:

### Leaving Cert. Religious Education Coursework

#### COURSEWORK PREPARATION

NB. Use of 'I' and 'We'

#### Part A:

**S** **Sources** – Outline a detailed and accurate list of sources that you used throughout your research  
Sources of information include:

- Books (name, publisher, author)
- Websites (exact web page address)
- Podcasts (see I-tunes web page)
- Films
- Interviews – reasons for conducting interview, a summary of views
- Visits
- Newspapers
- Surveys (must be detailed) – aim of research, methodology used, findings/conclusions

**S & S** **Steps and Skills** – In light of every source you listed above, explain in detail the steps you took and the skills you used in relation to this title. Steps = How did you process the information you found out? Link every step to the title. Keep demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the title. Skills = Research skills (where and how exactly did you use these in your sources above?), critical thinking skills, analytical skills, communication skills, etc.

Phrases which I have noted in students' coursework drafts which we identified as helpful to the class:

*One of the most important aspects of research was...*

*I found this interesting...*

*This book/website/survey gave me a clear impression of...*

*I gained an insight into...*

*For me, \_\_\_\_\_ was definitely a turning point because...*

*Indeed, I have developed many skills which will be beneficial to me in the future when I leave school, such as...*

*I have learned many new research skills...*

*My first step was experiential...*

*My first step was academic...*

*I was lucky enough to experience...*

*I absorbed as much information as I could...*

*My group and I used a variety of web-based sources...*

*These two websites were vital to me in my research as they provided me with...*

*I also used a range of book sources...*

*In my exploration I hope to ascertain...*

*I had to apply a critical approach here...*

*Discussing these helped spark students' reflections on their engagement with the title.*

**F** **Findings** – Link your sources to what you found out in your research about the chosen title. A substantial piece of detailed and extended research is expected here. What exactly did you learn about the title chosen? Link this all the time to the specific sources you used to gain the information.

Phrases which I have noted in students' coursework drafts which we felt were helpful in our discussions include:

*I established that...*

*As a result of the research...*

*I discovered...*

*My research led me to the conclusion that...*

*This concept was vital to my exploration of...*

*When investigating my coursework, I attempted to maintain a balanced view of...*

*It is important to acknowledge that...*

*One must question the possible bias in...*

*It is important to research the reliability of information presented...*

*On the basis of the information supplied to me by...*

## Part B:

**I Interest** – Explain in detail a few reasons why this title appealed to you. Show a real interest in the area and extensive reasoning as to why you chose the title.

Phrases to spark students' discussion and reflections include:

This title interested me in many ways...

There were various reasons as to why the title I chose attracted me...

*I wanted to understand...*

*I had an interest...*

*I believe...*

*In my opinion...*

The title \_\_\_\_\_ interested me because...

*I wanted to explore...*

*I was enthused by...*

*This title appealed to me since...*

*I have a passion for...*

**P Perspectives** - Must show at least 2 perspectives (eg. Personal, academic, another critic/writer's perspective etc.)

Phrases to spark students' discussion and reflections include:

*In comparison to...*

*In contrast to...*

*On the other hand...*

*Before I began this project I thought...*

*Therefore...*

*When considering this source, I cannot help but agree/disagree because...*

*This was something I was not aware of...*

*I focussed on the perspectives of...*

*This perspective influenced my view of...*

*It is perhaps not a pleasant insight to gain but...*

**Q Questions**

Phrases to spark students' discussion and reflections include:

*Before I began this project I thought...*

*In contrast to...*

*I started coursework with these basic questions. Later in my coursework I asked more detailed questions such as...*

*Undoubtedly, many questions arose throughout the exploration of my coursework...*

*I still struggle to understand...*

*Upon undertaking the coursework I came across many different...*

*I began by asking the obvious...*

*Having gained extensive insight into...*

*I questioned deeper issues such as...*

*Many interesting and challenging questions arose for me...*

**P.I Personal Insights**

*Before I began this project I thought...*

*Having gained extensive insight into...*

*Before I began this project I thought...*

*This was something I was not aware of...*

*On the other hand...*

*In contrast to...*

*In comparison to...*

*It is my view that...*

**V Valuable** – The most valuable parts of your coursework must link directly to the title you have chosen.

Phrases to spark students' discussion and reflections include:

*Having gained extensive insight into...*

*I have gained a respect for...*

*Before I began this project I thought...*

*This was something I was not aware of...*

*On the other hand...*

*I have learned to think critically...*

*I am now able to decipher biased pieces of information from unbiased...*

*In contrast to...*

*In comparison to...*

NB.

1. See Teachers' Guidelines: 1,000 – 1,500 words for OL and 1,200 – 1,500 words for HL
2. Reflect personally and critically throughout
3. Must have detailed account of title throughout
4. Question possibility of bias in all information i.e. interviews, websites, newspapers etc.
5. I advise students to demonstrate individual and collaborative work

#### TEACHER ASSESSMENT OF COURSEWORK

Having completed the above stages, I would then give each student two photocopies of the coursework booklet for them to use as a rough draft for the teacher to correct and return with comments/suggestions on how to improve by linking to the coursework title more often, following the coursework bullet point criteria for parts A and B etc. Finally, the students prior to the State Examinations Commission deadline will fill in the official coursework booklet. Of course where students submit draft coursework to me electronically it makes it much easier for me to insert comments and suggestions and for them to revise and edit their drafts.

#### SOME STUDENT FEEDBACK

Having surveyed this current group of students, the feedback was very positive. Here are some of their thoughts on what they wrote when considering the aspects of coursework they found helpful:

*"I enjoyed the visit to the mosque as we got to see firsthand the roles of men and women in Islamic worship."*

*"The various handouts on 'Coursework Preparation' and the guide on suggestions for Coursework 2010 were useful right throughout the writing of my booklet."*

*"I loved hearing the female perspective on my chosen title from our interview with Dr. Roja of Trinity College. She was very hopeful that many more women will play more prominent roles in Islamic religious leadership."*

*"Collating all the data from the surveys we conducted was hard work and we had many people in our class helping with this job. In the end the research we gained from our fellow students was worthwhile. Only 30% of those interviewed had adequate knowledge of the roles of men and women in Islamic worship, which shocked us."*

*"I found the internet a good source with tonnes of information on our title. It was hard to know where to start!"*

*"The visit to the Mater Dei library was helpful as it allowed us to use different library books for our sources."*

Good Luck!



# Non-Religious Sources of Values



Kieran Mc Tighe

*Human beings are defined by a will to know, that is, by a desire to ask questions in regards to issues such as truth, meaning and values. In the past, this enterprise took place largely within a religious context but later (particularly after the Enlightenment) developed along more secular/non-religious lines. This article will seek to examine these more secular sources of communal values that influence society today.*

Kieran Mc Tighe joined the R.E. Support local facilitator team in 2009 and is an experienced and creative teacher of R.E. and English in St. Joseph's College, Garbally, Ballinasloe, Co. Galway. His article offers sharp insight into some of the non-religious sources of communal values, one of the topics in 'The Search for Meaning and Values' in the Leaving Certificate R.E. syllabus.

*So what shapes our communal values in view of religion's diminishing influence?* I have chosen three areas which it could be argued have contributed to our set(s) of values in the world of the 21st century.

**Capitalism** – As a set of economic principles, capitalism exerts a huge influence on our daily lives in terms of how we live and behave, but more importantly is a philosophy which has underpinned and shaped our value systems. Put simply, Capitalism is a set of economic ideas based on private ownership. This is sometimes contrasted with Communism, which was averse to the idea of private ownership and a class-dominated society, preferring a more state-dominated model. The values associated with capitalism have come in for some strong criticism recently, especially in the wake of the international economic recession. Capitalism in its extreme form, has for example, been castigated for promoting greed, materialism, consumerism, individualism and instrumentalism. These so-called *isms* are often regarded as close relatives to capitalism with their dismissive attitude towards traditional values in deference to the pursuit of those associated the accumulation of objects of luxury and the pursuit of pleasure. A startling example of this during the era of the Celtic Tiger was in 2003 when hundreds queued from early morning outside a well-known department store in Dublin to purchase one of a small number of designer "Birkin bags". Retailing at around €4000, one woman expressed her delight at her purchase by exclaiming it was "a great day for Ireland!" At the time, it seemed that our set of values as a nation has undergone a paradigmatic shift, from a suspicion of consumerism to an enthusiastic embrace of it; from a metaphysical appreciation of the deeper realities in life to a pursuit of life's material attractions.

In this understanding, capitalism is frequently perceived as offering a set of values that is opposed to ideas like the common good, the environment or the needs of the less well-off in society. Positively, however, it is also associated with those things we value in society: hard work, effort, innovation and the need to reach our potential. Whether we agree or not with its underlying philosophy, capitalism is one of the most significant drivers in our society and culture and has shaped our values accordingly.

**Law** – secular law produces its own set of values and based on philosophical and political principles which in turn determine our place within society. Law sometimes finds itself at odds with the religious sphere in relation to certain moral/ethical matters. A recent example of this was the debate over whether there should be a reference to God in the European Union's Constitution. When the initial drafts of the constitution were released in 2003, reference was made to areas relating to the environment, human rights and national identity but none to God or the idea of a transcendent deity, in spite of Europe's Christian heritage. Some countries, e.g., Slovakia, Ireland and Poland, took issue with this omission whilst other more secular nations like France, the Netherlands and Spain, asserted the need to move beyond such references to embrace a more pluralist, secularist approach to Europe. Others pointed out that references to *Christian values* in the constitution may have an alienating effect on prospective members such as Turkey, whose heritage is predominantly Islamic, or members aligned to other faiths or systems belief/unbelief. More generally, however, law provides the citizens of a given country with a communal set of values by enforcing a set of standards of right and wrong thereby preserving order within society. In Ireland, for example, our laws come from a host of non-religious sources: English law, the European Union, our government and international law – all thoroughly secular in their focus and intention (although it could be argued that religious values and teaching have underpinned some of these). The values promoted by EU law,

## Syllabus link

LCRE Section A  
The Search for Meaning  
and Values

Topic 4.2  
*Secular sources of  
communal values*

for example, are not informed by a particular religious grouping but rather a more secular commitment to human rights, equality and tolerance. The legal stance of the EU to an issue like homosexuality or abortion is, for example, anathema to that of the Catholic Church for this very reason. In view of this, the legal stance on particular issues has found itself at odds with the stance adopted by a particular religious institution.

**Media** – Put simply, the media is defined as the various forms and means of communications. These forms of communications may arise in a number of different formats – written, printed or spoken. The most obvious examples of media are television, internet, radio and newspapers/magazines. But to what extent does the media shape values or does it merely reflect and represent the values of a given society? Over the past fifty years, the manner in which the media has functioned has changed significantly to the extent that we can now say the media has created a cultural set of values that has impacted greatly on human behaviour and morality.

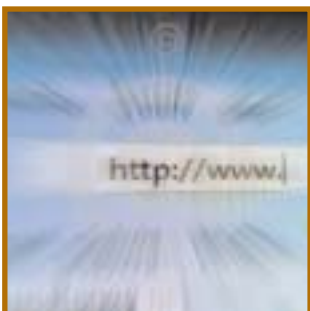
Unlike the past, where news and current affairs were transmitted via word of mouth, the media today allows us almost instant access to history as it unfolds. The numerous news channels and networks offer us their interpretations and angles on the various world events as they occur. TV programmes such as soap operas and TV dramas not only portray moral/ethical issues but also in certain instances, evaluate and preside upon them. This was brought to my attention recently when I was teaching a senior class on bioethics. Many of the students were able to tell me about one topic discussed – Euthanasia – not because they had read a lofty theological tome on the subject but rather because of its recent portrayal on an Irish soap opera and its cinematic presentation in Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*. Increasingly, therefore, we see that many more people are finding their source of values not from religious-based sources but from the more secular domains such as the media.

For many people, the internet – a vital organ of the media – represents a tremendous advancement in shaping and informing people's sets of values. A recent example of the power of the internet was in evidence in Iran where the ruling elite had sought to shut down websites which it regarded as potentially undermining to public order and its rule generally. This is a perfect illustration of where a largely theocratic government has sought to re-impose its set of religious, more traditional values by outlawing material which it sees as introducing a contrary set of more secular values. Aside from violent crackdowns on protestors, the Iranian authorities slowed down and cut internet access before anti-government demonstrations in order to hinder the reportage of resulting events. This is a clear illustration of the ability of cyberspace to create a whole new set of cultural, philosophical and political values.

Domestically, it is quite clear that the media occupies a prominent place in the collective consciousness. Positively, it can operate as a highly stimulating and educational tool that informs and entertains. Negatively, however, it can sometimes offer a skewed world-view accompanied by a harmful set of values and beliefs. The latter criticism has been levelled in particular at the phenomenon of reality TV. Many of these shows offer a substantial financial reward to the individual who manages to evade the public vote. This in turn, however, results in highly questionable moral decision-making on the part of the contestants. Reality TV, which began as a Dutch-based experiment in social engineering, posits its own set of highly spurious values which prioritise greed, fame and success over the more traditional ones like honesty, humility and charity.

The fact that many of us in the developed world spend an estimated three years of lives watching advertisements alone must have an effect on the way in which we interpret and think about the world around us. Some experts have also been quite critical of the media's portrayal of different groups and issues and the overall set of values it promotes. For example, to what extent does the media's portrayal of women filter down into the rest of society? To what extent are these damaging to women? Do they empower or undermine women? The effect of this over time is to communicate and transmit a set of values that see women stereotyped in a number of different ways. The media can mould our thinking on a myriad of issues and as such can be rightly regarded a powerful and significant source of communal values to those who access it regularly.

Whatever or from wherever our communal source of values derive, it is vital that they are aimed at the common good, have a strong sense of right and wrong, promote justice within our societies and preserve and protect the dignity of all human beings.





Report on Junior Certificate Religious Education Colloquium

## *'The Promise of Junior Certificate Religious Education'*

Lorraine Gillespie

*Hosted by Religious Education Support  
14th December 2009  
Kilkenny Education Centre*

### **Introduction**

Religious Education Support was proud to host the first National Colloquium on Junior Certificate Religious Education (JCRE) in December 2009. Since the JCRE syllabus was first introduced in 2000 the subject has seen a significant growth in uptake, from 5,787 candidates sitting the JCRE examination in 2003 to 25,016 candidates in 2009. As we approach the end of the first decade of its life it was felt that the time was right to invite participative dialogue around 'The Promise of Junior Certificate Religious Education', so that we might explore how far we may have come along the journey of implementing the worthy and pioneering aspirations of this superb syllabus, and what current and future considerations we need to take account of as we engage in the rich teaching and learning of this subject.

Forty five participants at the colloquium were invited to take part in this discussion among equals, with a wide diversity of backgrounds in attendance, among which were personnel from the Department of Education and Science, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the State Examinations Commission, schools (students, R.E. teachers, school managers, principal, parent), third level institutions, Diocesan Advisor, Trustee bodies, SLSS, and the Religion Teachers Association of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> This eclectic mix of people and backgrounds led to vibrant and stimulating small group discussions around key aspects related to the teaching and learning of the syllabus, and some of the opportunities and challenges which arise therein.

The purpose of the colloquium was to actively stimulate informed discussion around three key themes related to JCRE, with a view to encouraging further discussion about the journey ahead. This report presents an outline of the input delivered by our key note speakers, key aspects of the responses to questions which were put to participants after each presentation, and participants' general comments about the event. It is my hope that this report will help inform policy-makers, decision-makers, State bodies and other key stakeholders in R.E. about the value and progress of JCRE to date as well as some of the issues which may merit further thought, consideration and dialogue.

A unique feature of this event was the significant involvement of four students who had studied JCRE. Their uncensored and truthful reflections of the value of their learning experience was inspirational to hear, and is a real testament to the quality of teaching and learning in their R.E. classes, their teachers (notably their R.E. teacher – Angela Quinn) and in their school (Presentation Secondary School, Loughboy, Kilkenny). I wish to acknowledge here the supportive guidance offered by SLSS Student Council Co Coordinator - Deirdre Phelan - on best practice in the democratic involvement of students in this process. From the outset the students were invited into the process and fully briefed by the National Support Officer for R.E. on what was being asked of them, the backgrounds of colloquium participants, how they wished to address the group, and how their contributions would add to the overall report in an egalitarian way. Similarly, other participants at the colloquium were briefed about the involvement of the four students, and requested to be mindful of them and to ensure that their voices were heard and responses documented on an equal basis to the adults present. The involvement of these inspirational young people in the entire colloquium was one of the key successes of this event, and one that contributed greatly to the dialogue that followed both on the day and at subsequent educational events. I am grateful to Deirdre Phelan for kindly sharing her expertise and best practice advice on the involvement of students in this process in a meaningful manner.

<sup>1</sup> Participants were invited in a personal capacity and were not requested to represent the views of any bodies to which they belonged.

The colloquium consisted of three key 25 minute presentations, each followed by small group discussions on set focused questions. Each small group contained a chairperson and reporter in order to facilitate the process of delivering the feedback for this report.

## Aims of the Colloquium

- To provide an opportunity for the exchange of views on the current teaching and learning of Junior Certificate Religious Education
- To examine opportunities for developing affective dimensions of student learning
- To listen to students' narratives on the experience of Junior Certificate R.E. with a view to sharing our vision for future progress in implementing the syllabus
- To explore the opportunities and challenges that teachers encounter in teaching Junior Certificate Religious Education in a multi-faith context

The three presentations and key note speakers were as follows:

Title of Presentation	Key note speaker
'Measuring Student Achievement in Junior Certificate Religious Education: the Affective Domain'	<b>Suzanne Dillon</b> , Senior Inspector, Department of Education & Skills
Students' Experiences of Junior Certificate Religious Education'	Four students from Presentation Secondary School, Loughboy, Kilkenny: <b>Bronagh Dunne, Eimear Connick, Shauna Holohan and Amy Cooke</b>
'The Challenge to be Inclusive in a Multi-Faith R.E. Classroom'	<b>Mary Duff</b> , R.E. Teacher at Beaufort College, Navan, Co. Meath

*“Teachers don't feel the necessity under time constraints to deal with the affective domain because it's not assessed in the exam.”*

Lorraine Gillespie welcomed colloquium participants to this unique event and acknowledged the years of hard work and expertise of many of those present that been invested in the design and implementation of the syllabus. Extracts from the syllabus introduction & rationale were used to remind all of the philosophy behind the syllabus, e.g. 'R.E. should ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life' (JC Syllabus p4)<sup>2</sup>. She invited participants to reflect on the question of where we are currently at in relation to the promise of JCRE which is outlined in the syllabus rationale.

Ten years after the introduction of the syllabus, Ireland has undergone significant socio-economic, cultural and religious changes. Citing the 2006 census, participants were reminded that there is evidence of rapid growth rate in the number of adherents to non-Christian religious traditions in Ireland. For example, the Muslim population in Ireland has grown 69.9% between 2002 and 2006. Of particular significance was the increasing numbers of those who profess 'no religion' in the census – from 138,264 in 2002 to 186,318: an increase of 34.8%. Consequently the classroom climate for RE is different in 2010 than ten years ago. Teachers and school managers are making great progress in furthering the dialogue that is needed to ensure that schools are inclusive and rich learning environments for all students, respecting both the Characteristic Spirit of their schools and teaching a RE syllabus that is accessible to students of all faiths and of none. There is no doubt that there are many challenges in this journey. The expertise of our RE teachers is praiseworthy as they seek to bring the syllabus to life in meaningful ways to a very diverse population of young people in Ireland today. The need for further dialogue on these and other matters related to RE is clear – this colloquium invites us all to reflect on the opportunities and challenges we are faced with in the development of JC RE ten years on.

*“Need more of this – need to follow on. Need more in service on this area please.”*



L to R: Lorraine Gillespie (NSO – R.E.), Suzanne Dillon (DES Inspector), Michael Duignan (St Angela's College)

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1

*'Measuring Student Achievement in Junior Certificate Religious Education: the Affective Domain'*

*Suzanne Dillon, Senior Inspector, was introduced by Dr. Michael Duignan, St. Angela's College, Sligo.*

**Synopsis of paper:**

Suzanne's paper<sup>3</sup> reminded us of the purposes of Religious Education and the spectrum of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes which we seek to develop in students: the development of knowledge and understanding of various religious and non-religious world views and the development of attitudes of tolerance and respect. While the syllabus clearly identifies a range of cognitive learning outcomes (e.g. identify, describe, name, trace etc) it also contains outcomes in the affective domain – have an awareness of, understand the challenge of, explore etc. In fact the language indicates that each cognitive outcome has some affective component to it. The introduction to the syllabus and the Teachers' Guidelines reminds of these affective outcomes. Suzanne pointed out that the affective domain invites students to internalise the knowledge content of the lesson through reflection on the implications of the content. This helps develop the attitudinal outcomes such as – genuine engagement with the subject, awareness of and respect for the richness of religious traditions etc. Teachers can help develop the affective domain of students' learning by moving from a cognitive understanding of the concepts to exercises that encourage students to apply their understanding to their own experience, inviting students to respond to the content in personal and creative ways. Since assessment involves encouraging students to move to higher levels of thinking such as application and synthesis it involves both the cognitive and affective domains. While in no way undermining the importance of certificate exams, Suzanne emphasised that these are one element of student assessment. Classroom assessment better suits the purposes of assessing the affective domain. Strategies for monitoring student attainment could include classroom assessment, class tests, project work, Journal Work, practical course work, in-class presentations, discussions, action projects etc. Such activities can help develop students' thinking about the key concepts and the implications of these in their own lives. Finally, Suzanne invited participants to reflect on the language appropriate to constructing outcomes which measure achievement in the affective domain.

**Focused questions for small group discussion:**

1. *What are the difficulties in both theory and practice with outcomes in the affective domain?*
2. *Is it possible, or desirable, to measure affective outcomes in RE? Should we be seeking to identify measures of the attainment of what are essentially personal outcomes for our students?*
3. *Can you propose such measures, drawing on your own experience and the group discussion?*
4. *What other points would you like to make in relation to this topic?*

*“More professional development for teachers. Same type of day for Leaving Cert programme.”*

**Q 1: What are the difficulties in both theory and practice with outcomes in the affective domain?**

**Summary of feedback from small group discussion:**

The most frequently mentioned difficulties with affective outcomes were

- Teaching just to the exam: Fear of assessing the affective domain since a great deal of time needs to be spent on covering the course content for the exam.
- A feeling that the syllabus is too demanding – very difficult for students to articulate the affective. It demands a lot from students.
- There is too much responsibility on the teacher to create experiential learning opportunities and integrate the cognitive and affective, especially when there is often an absence of concepts of faith values in the home, so the climate outside the classroom is not always supportive.

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- Teachers don't feel the necessity under time constraints to deal with the affective domain because it's not assessed in the exam. Teachers tend to teach for the exam and because the affective domain isn't assessed they didn't feel the need to examine the faith dimension.
- Knowledge – what we want children to learn = problem: young people start from a different place...sacramental practice...the Church at present...all these levels in class – how is assessment meant to be where students are at?
- Subject not valued by students / parents.
- Role chaplains play is major in theory and practice.
- Time to take students places.
- Difficulty in practice: lack of spirituality among students – can't assume...need to find connections: e.g. where do you find awe and wonder?

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2

*“I would like to see the RE syllabus made shorter to allow reflection and time for particular topics to be explored.”*

- Few opportunities to experience wonder and awe in their lives outside of religious practice. Providing opportunities to allow students to feel awe and wonder.
- Teachers feeling embarrassed to teach / explain from a lived perspective some aspects of the course.
- Ethos of the school often isn't seen as important – should be emphasized, and need to be connected with affective domain.
- How do you measure the affective? What are the tools you use? Books, exams, teachers...? The practicalities? Tools of the trade – teachers: are they engaging? Can we make them? Methodologies, timetable, school culture, community?
- Changing the type of questions to 'why', analysis, e.g. 'Imagine you are going to ...'



*Discussion groups*

**Q 2: Is it possible, or desirable, to measure affective outcomes in RE? Should we be seeking to identify measures of the attainment of what are essentially personal outcomes for our students?**

*“There are other ways of checking affective Learning outcomes other than exams.”*

**Summary of feedback from small group discussion:**

The most frequent responses to this question were

- Yes, it is possible if they are talking about their lived experience.
- It happens in other subjects, so why not in R.E.?
- It is desirable but it must be assessed at the appropriate developmental level.

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- Assessment of this kind is a baby – needs to be minded.
- It is possible and desirable, but it has to be assessed at the pupil's level.
- How do you measure this component? It's a challenge for the Exam Commission to measure the affective domain based on the person's developmental experience and level.
- Reflective language is often a barrier.
- Does the syllabus demand too much of the student in the affective domain? The question was raised because a student is an individual and the faith development is different from person to person.
- How much assessment theory is examined and studied at Higher Diploma level?
- Is there a need for this religious affective domain to be made aware to all subject teachers and not just RE teachers? And also made important as a compulsory subject in the Higher Diploma?
- Can we actually assess attitudes? Yes, but it is a new aspect of assessment.
- Teachers are assessing attitudes the whole time but not in a scientific way.
- The world of commerce speaks about measuring attitudes in units – cf Catherine Mc Geachy.
- Finding the 'how' is the challenge. We are better at the 'what'.
- Are students capable at the age of 13 – 15 of processing their knowledge / experiences? Students need to be trained in critical thinking skills – a specific training.
- The journal could be broadened to facilitate an affective question (or any part of the exam).
- Should we be measuring it at all? Who determines whether an attitude is right or wrong? One must be cognizant of the culture one grows up in.
- Knowledge is a 'safe' area.
- There are other ways of checking affective learning outcomes other than exams.
- Suggest questions on affective questions on the Journal Work booklet.
- Language and concepts are too difficult.
- What happens if the class is too teacher driven?
- Should other ways be used to assess RE at JC? E.g. Practical base.
- If it is too practical based like CSPE does it diminish the value of the course?
- The reality is that the teacher is so focused on results that even the affective answer can be prepared.

**Q 3: Can you propose such measures, drawing on your own experience and the group discussion?**

**Summary of feedback from small group discussion:**

Participants' most commonly used answers referred to the way in which RE is taught – experiential learning is important in creating opportunities for assessing the affective domain. Some answers also reflected a desire to see the Journal Work facilitate more reflection on the affective domain.

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- The manner in which it is taught is very important. It's a two-way process between students and the teacher.
- Multi-sensory approach – touch, smell etc. Table, film, food, objects, music etc. Make it relevant and make it connect to experience – student culture.
- Journal Work should contribute to a higher % of the overall marks, e.g. distribute marks 40%:60% instead of 20%:80%. Hints at the side are not suitable and makes journal work difficult.
- Space in Journal Booklet for measuring affective dimensions e.g. could ask 'what is of lasting value in this journal work for me?' Exploit these more.
- Personal development is what works.
- Both individual and group presentations help.
- Too much to be examined and leaves teachers cramped and not able to go deep or have prayer sessions.
- Oral exam? Proposed measures: multi-disciplined, depending on the school. What about an 'oral'? A way towards a solution?

*“The manner in which it is taught is very important. It's a two-way process between students and the teacher.”*

**Q 4: What other points would you like to make in relation to this topic?**

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- It is the way that it is taught that is important.
- Real learning is often experiential learning.
- The predispositions – gender, age, development, teachers etc are important.
- Having an exam is the best thing that has happened to RE – without the exam it was a doss.
- The course is teaching tolerance, respect and knowledge.
- What about students who have no faith – no tradition of ritual etc? Back to their 'place' as regards where they are as 14 year olds...
- Huge potential in the syllabus. Text books are very important. Student mentioned that her faith was strengthened through studying Judaism – she learned to know Jesus more.
- Structure of Journal Work needs change.
- Does the exam address the issue mentioned by Suzanne? Does success element predominate? What of faith formation? Tension / pressure to get the course finished.

*“What about an oral? A way towards a solution.”*

*“Having an exam is the best thing that has happened in R.E. – without the exam it was a doss.”*



*Discussion groups*

## 'Students' Experiences of Junior Certificate Religious Education'

Angela Quinn, RE teacher at Presentation Secondary School, Loughboy, Kilkenny introduced four TY students who completed their Junior Certificate R.E. studies in 2009: Amy Cooke, Eimear Connick, Bronagh Dunne, and Shauna Holohan.

### Synopsis of students' papers<sup>4</sup>:

Junior Certificate R.E. was taken by some students in the school in 2009, but not all. These four students are confident that it is a worthwhile course and it presents highly interesting topics for learning. They show a level of engagement with the subject that is admirable and their overall experience of JC RE has been a positive and encouraging one. They draw particular attention to the value of Journal Work and to Section D of the syllabus, The Question of Faith. They are equally honest about some of the challenges they encountered in studying JC RE, in particular the perceived workload involved and the difficulty with preparing for the examination

- Highlights of the course – topics of particular appeal and interest e.g. Judaism, understanding other religious traditions, the miracles of Jesus, the importance of ritual in human and religious contexts, the importance of morality.
- The capacity of JC RE to help students understand and commit to their own religious identities and traditions, including the realities of their faith traditions. – 'To look within and figure out what I believed in'.
- How JC RE helps students to understand themselves better as people and their search for faith – how it can change the way we think and challenge our attitudes towards life.
- The capacity of JC RE to equip students with the skills and critical discernment to acknowledge the beliefs and traditions of others and to open up their perceptions.
- Insights into the importance of moral decision-making and factors which affect moral growth and decisions – how these are integrated in human and Christian life; to consider personal responsibility and how personal actions affect relationships with others.
- The value of Journal Work – how one of the titles helped one presenter to 'think like Jesus' and to 'look deeper into the essence of Jesus'; how it builds confidence, the benefit of the choice of twelve prescribed titles.
- Challenges: the workload involved as much, if not more work than other subjects – massive course content and how this affected revision for other subjects.
- How R.E. differed from other subjects – perceived as more difficult because we can't 'learn off' the answers; worry over how to express one's opinions appropriately in the exam.
- The experience of the exam – difficult to manage time, difficulty of questions / language.

### Focused questions for small group discussion:

1. *What do you see as the benefits of students studying Junior Certificate R.E. – for themselves, schools, and society in general?*
2. *Is the amount of course content satisfactory? What recommendations would you make in terms of modifying course content, if any? Please be as specific as possible.*
3. *How are R.E. teachers and students finding the work if integrating educational academic achievement with students' personal and spiritual / faith formation, as appropriate?*
4. *What other points would you like to make in relation to this topic?*

**Q 1: What do you see as the benefits of students studying Junior Certificate R.E. – for themselves, schools, and society in general?**

### Summary of feedback from small group discussion:

Many respondents felt that students gained in knowledge and skills in this course since it allows an interest which may not always exist at home. The school benefits by having an opportunity to express its ethos through charity work etc. JCRE opens students and the school to different opinions and they are challenged to see another point of view, which is good for their personal growth. This helps them understand other peoples' perspectives and beliefs at a deeper level. It fosters self-examination, spirituality and values and allows opportunities to link with the local parish. The classroom is a place of dialogue where students can come to understand their own tradition better through inter-religious input.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 3 for full text of students' papers

*“Listening to the four girls gave me hope for what we are doing in class.”*

*“RE promotes the development of tolerance, acceptance of diversity, creating thinking people and the development of critical assessment in society.”*

*“Need to re-evaluate language used.”*

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- JCRE broadens students' views, challenges them to see another point of view (e.g. Church – institution AND People of God). Students are exposed to a wealth of knowledge and they love the learnt experience. This can be the meat on the bones of what's going on for them at home and their personal growth. RE promotes the development of tolerance, acceptance of diversity, creating thinking people and the development of critical assessment in society.
- It is part of the holistic experience for students – allows them learn about other religions. It explores values we work out of in society and gives skills for standing back rather than following the crowd.
- It helps students see what they really believe in and to listen carefully to other students.
- Religion is such a big part of the world. JCRE builds capacity to help people understand other people's perspectives / beliefs / lifestyle / traditions.
- A lot of recognition of shared values, especially where there are multi-cultural settings.
- There is evidence of the syllabus impacting on students' lives.
- Relationship of subjects to each other – SPHE, CSPE, RE. Debate about this...RE as an academic subject to be chosen so is now seen in one school as distinct and apart from the 'low status' subjects like CSPE and SPHE. RE is no longer 'low status' since the introduction of the exam.
- Classroom as a place of dialogue and discussion – enrichment of student experiences – living ecumenism and inter faith dialogue – respect for humility.
- Anxiety among teachers – where is the teacher in their own story? And in their own knowledge?
- Rituals make RE accessible to students and higher experiential aspect as regards other religions.
- Need to factor in the non-religious viewpoints in RE class.
- Inter religious input also helps to understand one's own tradition.
- Need for on-going professional development for teachers and teaching in a multi-faith context.

**Q 2: Is the amount of course content satisfactory? What recommendations would you make in terms of modifying course content, if any? Please be as specific as possible.**

**Summary of feedback from small group discussion:**

Most respondents felt that the course was too long and that the language was very difficult and not always accessible to students. Many would like to see adjustments to Journal Work and would also favour a reduction in the overall course content.

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- The course content is too long.
- Language, amount of content and time management are all difficult.
- There is no real differentiation at ordinary level at the moment except in the length of the paper.
- Positive experience of the syllabus but not of the examination.
- Journal Work is good but needs to be rebalanced in favour of rewarding student who show what they have learnt. Questions are needlessly repetitive.
- Journal Work titles should connect with the experience of students.
- Course is very comprehensive and broad – not sure how to study for the exam.
- Big overlap – need to have full knowledge. Difficult to leave out a section.
- Some students find Section B of course tough.
- We are really teaching students of no faith and some.
- Need to re-evaluate language used.
- I would like to see a little bit taken out of each topic – the course is very long.
- Language of examination needs too be more accessible to students – very difficult.
- Section A is very rambling – need to cut! Section A part 3 – too much in it. Some of it is covered in other sections and A part 5 too.
- Too many key concepts – need to be streamlined.
- We agree with the student's reference to reducing the amount of content so as to facilitate reflection in details.
- Opportunities to experiment with Journal Work within classrooms in order to facilitate change.
- Many students with learning difficulties find the RE exam very difficult.
- Need greater emphasis on Journal Work assessment. Journal Work format – students' work is not coming across in the Journal booklet. A more experiential approach and perhaps 40% assessment marks for the Journal Work would be good.

**Q 3: How are R.E. teachers and students finding the work of integrating educational academic achievement with students' personal and spiritual / faith formation, as appropriate?**

**Summary of feedback from small group discussion:**

The issues mentioned with most frequency here were

Journal Work – some felt that it deserves higher marks than 20%, a feeling that students' personal/faith formation does not get due recognition in the exam, and a feeling that less syllabus content would help.

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- Need to be open to students and their questions. Need to meet students where they are at.
- Less content would help but reducing the syllabus won't help if the exam is not changed.
- Some assessment of matters to do with how affective domain is to be included – maybe more emphasis on journal – higher percentage for it.
- Student found that the journal work was more daunting and difficult than requirements for CSPE – maybe this should be looked at – why it appears much harder and less clear than other JC subjects being assessed.
- Different views expressed on 'let's have this like CSPE'.
- 'Faith formation is not my job. It's the school's job' – disagreement around this. Can students' JCRE result reflect affective, spiritual development?
- Need good chaplain to support the RE section in faith development.
- Organising prayer services and retreats and following the liturgical year.

*“Less content would help but reducing the syllabus won't help if the exam is not changed.”*



*Mary Duff (Beaufort College, Navan), Annette Honan (NCCA), Lorraine Gillespie, Angela Quinn (Teacher, Presentation SS, Knockboy), Suzanne Dillon (Senior Inspector, DES), Shauna Holohan, Eimear Connick, Amy Cooke, Bronagh Dunne (Students, Presentation SS, Loughboy, Kilkenny).*

*“Loved the day and felt privileged to be here. Brilliantly organised with great finesse.”*

**Q 4: What other points would you like to make in relation to this topic?**

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- The boundaries – where are the lines on personal development and for the teacher? The limits on the RE teacher in a voluntary school and community school... The teacher's own journey – a curse or a gift? Do you take the journey at all?
- Teachers need to be reaffirmed and need CPD so as to encourage them in their delivery of the course.

*'The Challenge to be Inclusive in a Multi-Faith R.E. Classroom'*

Mary Duff, Teacher, Beaufort College, Navan, Co. Meath

1. A Multi-Faith RE Classroom in a Multi-faith school
2. The teacher in the Multi-faith RE classroom
3. The Students in the Multi-faith Classroom
4. The Challenges
5. The Opportunities

This presentation<sup>5</sup> highlights the changing student population profile in recent years, with particular attention on the variety of second level students' religious backgrounds. Mary examines the role of the school and the varying roles of the R.E. teacher in the context of the multi-faith classroom. While opportunities include scope for the sharing of the richness of religious traditions, inter-faith dialogue, ecumenism, building student capacity for empathy, tolerance and respect, some of the challenges are also considered. These include dealing sensitively with issues of language, religious symbols, customs and practices, parental consent for students to withdraw from R.E., school ethos and identity and its responsibilities in this regard, teacher training and school's management of change for the benefit of the wider community and education in general. The presentation invites members of the Colloquium to consider a number of questions and issues in this area, with a view to sharing our collective expertise, practice and views on this topic of great importance.



Mary Duff

*Mary Duff is a teacher of Religious Education and History at Beaufort College, Navan, Co. Meath. A graduate of Mater Dei Institute, Mary has extensive teaching experience. In particular, her experience encompasses both Junior and Leaving Certificate Religious Education (for State examination) in addition to R.E. as a non-exam subject. Mary's experience of teaching R.E. in recent years has highlighted the increasing population of international students. Many of her students come from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds, including practicing and non-practicing Catholics from Ireland, Poland and Lithuania; Evangelical and Orthodox Christians, Muslims of Asian descent born in Ireland, practising Muslims from Nigeria, and others.*

**Focused questions for small group discussion:**

1. *What are the hopes and uncertainties of students, teachers, management bodies and others in relation to the issue of inclusion of students from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds in the R.E. class?*
2. *How best should teachers ensure that the R.E. syllabus is made accessible to students of all faiths and of none in their classrooms?*
3. *What achievable recommendations would you make for support for teachers in a multi-faith classroom context? Please be as specific as possible. (Your answers may refer to a variety of types of support from various sources).*
4. *What other points would you like to make in relation to this topic?*

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 4

**Q 1:** *What are the hopes and uncertainties of students, teachers, management bodies and others in relation to the issue of inclusion of students from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds in the R.E. class?*

**Summary of feedback from small group discussion:**

Most participants agreed that there were real challenges to be faced in embracing diversity and interculturalism in modern Ireland and that RE teachers will in future need support with this. There was a general feeling also that school managers may need to offer guidance on dealing with the challenges, and that policies around whole school approaches need to be developed.

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- Challenge of where to put students whose parents do not want them in R.E. class.
- Issue of 'back of class' – freedom to opt out...health and safety issues.
- Policies need to be adopted and worked out.
- Bigger question of 'School Identity' where some staff considered 'inclusion' as an erosion of Catholic ethos.
- Vulnerability for schools around Admissions Policy – schools might become too narrowly catholic; graduation Mass.
- Opportunities: R.E. must make sense to all, must be relevant, respect for varied view points.
- Primary / Higher Level - great written values statements yet teachers can feel very insecure and fearful of messiness so go to text book and teach the text book, ignoring the students in front of them.
- Challenges facing BOMs around the country – e.g. wearing the hijab / Muslim dress – rite of passage with Muslims.
- Biggest threat to ethos are those with no faith at all – “no religion for me, but honours maths”.
- R.E. Policy must be for school not only R.E. class.
- Is Ireland fearful of other non-Christian religions?
- Is R.E.'s purpose to make best Muslims? Humanistic.
- It comes back to parents - some having difficulty with a man teaching his/her child.
- N.B. – The R.E. syllabus is inclusive of all religions and none – very important. Syllabus allows teachers / school to teach Catholicism.
- Is R.E. core in school or optional?
- Hopes and uncertainties – hope that all students would take it (all denominations, non-religions, multi-faith).
- Management body of the school will encourage all to do R.E. regardless of beliefs / non-beliefs.
- Hopes / uncertainties – support from management bodies? Get them to start thinking about what ethos means.
- Enshrined in the ethos and the lived experience are very different.
- Management bodies backing off after recent revelations etc.
- Mis-information needs to be challenged e.g. belief that indoctrination takes place in the classroom – coming from secular / multi-faith parents/guardians)
- Dual responsibility – parents and management bodies, in finding out about R.E., what it entails and what is covered in the classroom.
- Sense of belonging for all.
- Include all faiths in religions / cultural traditions / liturgies.
- Trustee bodies – need to be offering support and clarifying their own ethos.
- Clearly defined R.E. policy.
- Lived reality – not just on paper
- Support from management
- Whole school support needed
- Strong parent support needed
- Teachers need in service and personal development e.g. retreats, pastoral support
- Support Service – not to be integrated with other subjects
- New teaches, well established teachers all need assistance.
- People feeling isolated in R.E.
- Giving of yourself all the time. You can not take from an empty well.
- Positive discrimination towards R.E. needed
- Chaplaincy – funded chaplaincy in some schools but not in the voluntary sector.
- Many uncertainties about legal issue – who can opt in or out
- Supervising students in our classes who don't take R.E. The negative effect of this on other students.
- We would see a possibility of making our syllabus more transparent to school and home communities. Our syllabus reads very inclusive but our books and resources read very 'Catholic'
- Textbooks need to reflect on the actual experiences of our students

*“Teachers can feel very insecure and fearful of messiness so go to textbook and teach the textbook, ignoring the students in front of them.”*

*“Bring in students from a DEIS school to share their own insights. Also allow the 'academics' to share their research on these important educational challenges.”*

*“Personal development needed for RE teachers. Continue with SLSS support. This year I have taken as many as possible – I feel that these have helped me greatly in the classroom as a professional and in delivering the course.”*

- Having teachers share their own stories of teaching multi-faith teaching
- In service is very necessary to learn facts and gain insights into students of non-Catholic, non-faith backgrounds.
- Are concerns the same for students / teachers etc?
- BOM upholds characteristic spirit of school. Does the inclusion of children of other faiths impact (negatively or positively) on school?
- It is a difficult issue for all
- Parents' constitutional right
- Huge advantage to having a multi-faith classroom
- The expectations are all different – you are dealing with a bewildering web!
- Developing policy on inclusion – aim is to achieve participation by all in the RE course – a need to clarify what the school stands for
- The identity of the school – a need to express this. A role for management bodies and school leadership – whether written down or not there is a lived identity.
- Challenge – parents want to send their children to this school but do not buy into the espoused values of the school – admissions issues, balancing the rights of the school/management bodies/trustees with the rights/concerns of parent
- Pluralism is a commitment in the Education Act
- Teachers: are open to the challenge, but it is a large one. The opportunities available for learning.
- Students: are taken from the atmosphere created in the school – from the top down, how the teacher leads will determine how students follow.
- Hopes and uncertainties – inclusion – issue of changing cultural situation. Individual situation – bring uncertainties and can lead to confusion about ethos/identity of school – even in Catholic owned schools is there a clear understanding of what ethos is and how it is lived out.

*Q 2: How best should teachers ensure that the R.E. syllabus is made accessible to students of all faiths and of none in their classrooms?*

**Summary of feedback from small group discussion:**

Participants felt in general that this could be accomplished by seeking out areas of commonality among all students and promoting core values such as tolerance and respect, and that this should be a whole school approach. Journal work, art work, class discussion, rituals and liturgies also provided rich learning opportunities for students.

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- How not to reduce everything to lowest common denominator?
- Are other faiths open to this outreach also?
- Challenge to R.E. teachers to be as creative as possible in designing liturgies to reflect student body.
- Question implies the teacher 'should'...
- You can make RE available in a faith-free context
- You can promote core values – tolerance
- Recommendations – core values central and should be clearly established
- Clarity surrounding withdrawal of student from RE classroom – a national debate - is it religious studies with ethics or Religious Education?
- Respect and tolerance are reasonable demands from which a student can't opt out – this should be written into code of conduct etc?
- Structural issue - the choice of major world religion implies others not done - how to make this decision in a multi-religious setting
- A need to develop students' own identities in their faiths if dialogue is to be meaningful
- The journal work
- In an ideal world would like to include rituals of different traditions – tap into the richness of the classroom – what's a VEC school?
- In my school which is a VEC school we do a lot of poster work to show the practices / traditions that are in the school.
- In accommodating multi-faith classrooms – learn to say hello in the language – with religions – I want you to be the best Muslim you can be! Critical that he can be himself in the journey (used to feel very responsible)
- Uncertainty of teachers of RE – e.g. still have those who don't what to do RE in my class – not participating – but they have to sit in the class. Now and again when they participate I let them.
- Is there a need to talk this out with parents i.e. what happens?

*“I most enjoyed hearing about the teacher's experience in a multi-faith class”*

*“Colloquium is a fantastic exercise in bringing together people who are passionate about R.E.”*

- Confusion – between RE and faith based RE – in schools – for teacher and for school - we’re responsible for moral, spiritual education of students – where are we doing this apart from RE?
- At a theological level I can not say your prayer as a Muslim so inter faith prayer service
- E.g. story of death of a 5 year old Hindu boy – hospital chaplain conducted service, did not ‘take the shoes off’ - did not acknowledge religious tradition.
- Issue of qualified teacher teaching – should always be a qualified teacher teaching the subject to understand the boundaries.



Mary Duff illustrates her input with a mind map.

**Q 3: What achievable recommendations would you make for support for teachers in a multi-faith classroom context? Please be as specific as possible. (Your answers may refer to a variety of types of support from various sources).**

**Summary of feedback from small group discussion:**

Most felt that all relevant avenues of support should be sought – especially Management and Trustees – to discuss the teaching of RE in multi-faith classrooms. The School’s Mission Statement was seen by many as the focus for this, so all students should be made aware of it. It was also felt that students should be consulted on this issue.

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- Essential questions is – what do we have to give up to gain inclusivity?
- New thinking required as well as engaging with parents as to why they have chosen this school?
- Respect for all religions needs to be taught
- Board of Management policy and Whole School approach needed.
- Inter cultural guidelines from NCCA – specifics would help.
- Board of Management needs to think out policy from moment of induction.
- Need to consult students re liturgies and appropriate symbols.
- Recommendations for support in multi-faith classroom? Place of religion in VEC?
- In multi-faith need clarity re policies, boundaries, ethos, visions, need for leadership. Good adult education of parent body.
- Characteristic spirit evolving in all schools in response to other faiths etc – great need for education of Patrons / Trustees.
- Learning for good practice from other schools – e.g. Britain, Europe.
- Importance of In service & also RTAI.
- Support must come from the State, expressed through the BOM
- Awareness of SLSS R.E. Forum
- Every person in a school community should have an understanding of school’s mission statement
- There should be a minimum standard of behaviour upheld
- State agencies such as Headstrong is tackling serious issues once tackled by / in / through R.E.

*“I enjoyed the speakers and the follow-up group work. Many different ideas and approaches were discussed and I have lots to think about. Thanks very much.”*

**Q 4: What other points would you like to make in relation to this topic?**

**Feedback included the following comments:**

- Colloquium is a fantastic exercise in bringing together people who are passionate about R.E.
- For principals, Trustee Bodies, Boards of Management/Governors, JMB - informative process from this colloquium to be fed back to them
- Another follow on needed, building on this colloquium in the immediate future.

## Concluding Remarks

### Annette Honan, Education Officer, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

#### Responding to contributions

In concluding today's excellent seminar I will try to draw together some of the key ideas and then look towards the future to identify some developments that may impact upon R.E.

#### 1. *The affective dimension of RE*

Suzanne Dillon correctly began the day by reminding us of the questions that all educators must always keep in mind – What's it all for? Or as Paulo Freire put it 'What am I educating for? What am I educating against?' This begs the question: 'what kind of **knowing** is it that we wish to promote?'. How can we achieve a knowing that combines head, heart and hands and feet? In the past we spoke of learning the Catechism 'by heart'. Did we really learn by heart?

It's easy to blame the 'exam' when teaching becomes overly concerned with content but let's remember that this has always been a danger. There's always a danger when Religion falls into trap of 'Gnosticism' – you'll remember this was one of the earliest heresies of the Christian Church that promoted the doctrine of salvation by knowledge. It's an easy heresy for RE teachers to fall into.

In this context it's worth mentioning the ESRI survey (longitudinal study of 900 students in 12 case-study schools) which found that students disliked subjects that were just about 'learning off stuff' – Irish and History fared badly on this. They like practically orientated subjects PE, Computers, Metalwork, Home Ec - and subjects that are taught in a practical/engaging way.

Looking to the future I think the way in which syllabus documents are now being written in terms of learning outcomes is a positive move especially when the learning outcomes carefully integrate outcomes that relate to the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domain. Also we have already seen evidence that the embedding of key skills within teaching and learning helps create a better balance not only between teaching content and skills but leads to more varied, active and engaging teaching methodologies. Plans are now in progress to extend this work to Junior Cycle.

2. **The presentation from the students** highlights the importance of listening to students' voices. This is one the greatest shifts that has occurred within the work of the NCCA in recent years. Now student voices are genuinely informing emerging developments right across the system. When we're thinking about change we're now trying to ensure that it's more finely tuned to the reality of teaching and of students' lives. Schools are being given more say in change and how it happens.

*Ref. Leading and Supporting Change – paper on the web*

I've been personally very involved in this work through my work with schools in the development of Transition Units, the embedding of key skills and the development of Flexible and Personalised learning. This has really created a new way of working and thinking. It has also wakened up teachers to the value of asking their students about their learning – *Asking the students for feedback on their learning and learning from it was, for me, one of the most useful aspects of it all. It forced me to evaluate what I was doing which was good and I will definitely do this more in the future.*

#### 3. **Mary Duff's presentation**

When people gathered round the table to develop the JC syllabus – the world was a different place than it is today. Ireland was different, our schools were different and most significantly – our understanding of how cultural and religious diversity can be respected within the context of Christian religious education.

*The syllabus asserts Religious Education should ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life. It has a particular role to play in the curriculum in the promotion and mutual understanding. It seeks to develop in students the skills needed to engage in meaningful dialogue with those of other, or of no, religious tradition.*

The syllabus does go some way in delivering on this aim, and the work of the RE Support Service in the early years played a crucial role in enhancing teachers' understanding and skills in relation to respecting a diversity of faiths and beliefs within their classrooms. We cannot lose sight that our society, communities and schools are culturally diverse.



Annette Honan

*“The most valuable opportunity to open a conversation of RE / formation I have ever attended”*

*“A wide range of other issues should be addressed in this fashion in the future. It is a fair, democratic way to improve policies etc in society today”*

Educating Christians in culturally diverse contexts like many of our schools requires 3 things –

- Knowing **what** to do = knowledge/awareness
- Knowing **how** to do it = skill
- Knowing **why** to do it = motivation (attitude)

Cultural awareness is a both an attitude and a skill. As such, we must cultivate it and perfect it on a continuous basis. Much more is needed in supporting all teachers in this area and as Christian educators we have the obligation to be culturally responsive and respectful of diversity when educating in faith.

#### Looking to the future

The former Minister for Education, Batt O’Keeffe, spoke to NCCA Council in June and re-iterated some of the challenges identified in the ESRI research

- a minority of students disengage from learning in second year
- students experience an overcrowded curriculum
- the Junior Certificate exerts too great an influence on the teaching and learning in junior cycle. And the Leaving Cert sets the tone for Junior Cycle learning

He asked us to

- review international practice in lower secondary education
- set out the rationale for change – why?
- process for change – how?
- main directions – possible future scenarios or possibilities

Amongst the key directions being presented are ideas on how to bring a stronger emphasis on teaching and learning and how to promote a different kind of learning than that which is currently dominating. It’s generally agreed that the junior cert exam casts too long a shadow over junior cycle and the link between the J Cert exam and the L Cert needed to be redressed. The Junior Cert is often viewed as a rehearsal for the final exam. So the paper sets out some ideas for how this could be redressed while ensuring that the Junior Cycle lays the foundation for Senior Cycle and provides significant continuity but that continuity may not necessarily require continuity of exams. So it poses the question of whether students need to be examined in every subject that they study in Junior Cycle? What would happen if students were only examined in English Irish and Maths at the end of Junior Cycle? What other ways can be used to gather evidence of learning?

The paper also examines the question of curriculum overload (have no. of subject - 12) and ask us to consider giving schools more flexibility to choose a curriculum that gives more time and space for skills based learning as well as content. It also puts forward some ideas and questions regarding curriculum flexibility and sets out a possible scenario where schools would be given significant freedom to design their own curriculum for Junior Cycle.

We know from our experience of working with schools that schools need considerable support and resources to take on this kind of role as places of curriculum development but our work with senior cycle schools that when they are given this support they are very open to change and very creative in devising programmes of study that respond to their students needs. What would be the likely outcome for Religious Education if schools were given this kind of freedom? Would it be placed at the bottom of the pecking order or disappear entirely in some schools? I’d take an optimistic view on this because I’ve seen how schools have responded to this opportunity to develop personalized programmes of study in the context of a project we’ve been working on – FLPs – when given the chance to develop their own curriculum – all agreed that the moral, ethical, civic and spiritual dimension must be a core part.

Keep an eye on our website for your chance to contribute and comment as these ideas unfold: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)



*Lorraine Gillespie with Paul Fields  
– Director of Kilkenny Education Centre*

## Appendix 1

### Outline view of introductory Power Point Presentation

*Education Is not the filling of a pail but the Lighting of a Fire*  
W.B. Yeats

*'Religious Education is well placed to provide students with opportunities for reflection on human experience as well as for understanding and interpretation of that experience. Such opportunities encourage the students' participation in their own conscious and critical development.'*  
Junior Certificate R.E. Syllabus, p.3

*'Religious Education should ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life.'*  
JCRE Syllabus, p.4

*'It has a particular role to play in the curriculum in the promotion of tolerance and mutual understanding.'*  
JCRE Syllabus, p.4

*'It seeks to develop in students the skills needed to engage in meaningful dialogue with those of other, or of no, religious traditions.'*  
JCRE Syllabus, p.4

*'The aim of Junior Cycle Religious Education is to provide students with a framework for encountering and engaging with a variety of religious traditions in Ireland and elsewhere.'*  
JCRE Syllabus, p.4

#### 2009: Examples of religious plurality: 2006 Census: 4.2 million population

- Roman Catholics = 86.8% (3.6 Million)
- Church of Ireland = 3% (125,600)
- Muslims = 0.8%
- Presbyterian = 0.6%, Orthodox = 0.5%, Methodist = 0.3%, and Other 2.1%
- 6.2% specify 'no' religious faith (Source: [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie))
- Evidence of rapid growth rate of numbers of adherents to non-Christian religious traditions, e.g.
- Muslim population: 1992, c1000 Muslims in Ireland. 69.9% increase from 2002 – 2006 (19,147 to 32,539)
- In 2006, 57,900 identified themselves as belonging to 'other stated religions' (+44% increase)
- 138,264 (2002), 186, 318 (2006) stated 'no religion' = 34.8% increase

## Appendix 2

### Colloquium Paper 1 - Measuring Student Achievement in Junior Certificate Religious Education: the Affective dimension [Suzanne Dillon, Senior Inspector, Department of Education & Science]

A discussion paper: This article is written only to stimulate discussion within the colloquium.

Why do we teach Religious Education? In order to discuss student achievement in the subject, we need to be clear about the purposes or aims of Religious Education. We could come up with a variety of answers to this question, drawing on philosophy, tradition and faith stance, for example, and the answers would speak of our world views. When, in 2000, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) introduced a syllabus for Religious Education, it provided for a very broad definition of purpose: in summary, RE is about the development of knowledge and understanding of various religious and non-religious worldviews and it is about the development of attitudes of tolerance and respect. It is with this latter purpose that this discussion is concerned.

The syllabus identifies a large number of cognitive learning outcomes – it asks that students are able to identify, describe, name, trace, be able to differentiate between, compare and contrast. It provides a much shorter list of affective learning outcomes and these are couched in much less precise language – have an awareness of, understand the challenge of, explore...in fact, the language used illustrates how any cognitive objective has some affective component to it, if at no deeper level than its achievement requires a willingness on the part of students to sufficiently interact with the lesson taught that the learning intended might be achieved. Let's look at two examples-

Mr. Murphy teaches his students about the Qu'ran. He wants his students to remember and be able to describe and discuss what this book is and how it came to be. In addition, he wants them to be able to differentiate between faith documents and historical documents. In exploring this section of the course, he is also mindful that the syllabus seeks to promote an understanding and appreciation of why people believe, as well as tolerance and respect for the values and beliefs of all.

Mrs. O'Brien is working with her students on part 4 of Section A. They are exploring the concepts of sectarianism and religious conflict. Mrs. O'Brien will ask her students to remember and reproduce definitions of terms like sectarianism and ecumenism on a class test, but she also hopes that they will recognize the importance of respecting their own beliefs and the beliefs and convictions of others.

In both these examples, there are clear cognitive outcomes and these are helpfully identified in the relevant sections of the syllabus. There are also affective outcomes, most often suggested in the introduction to the syllabus and easily identifiable in the above examples. The affective domain invites the student to internalise the knowledge content of the lesson through reflection on the implications of the content. Through that process, the attitudinal outcomes identified in the NCCA framework for assessment, may be realised (Guidelines for Teachers p.55). These are

- genuine engagement with the subject
- awareness of and respect for the richness of religious traditions
- awareness of the non-religious interpretation of life
- openness to individual and collective search for meaning
- openness to dialogue and the search for mutual understanding

What can teachers do in the classroom to help students achieve these outcomes? How does assessment fit in? The first question is answered in many RE classrooms where teachers move from a cognitive understanding of faith concepts and vocabulary to exercises that encourage students to express their understanding and application of concepts in their own words. By requiring them to integrate the content with their own experiences, teachers challenge students to deeper awareness or sensitivity, and provide them with opportunities to respond to the content in personal and creative ways. 'Religious Education is well placed to provide students with opportunities for reflection on human experience as well as for understanding and interpretation of that experience. Such opportunities encourage the students' participation in their own conscious and critical development.' (Syllabus, p.3).

The second question is the focus of this discussion. 'Assessment is an integral part of the educational process. Its purposes include fostering learning, improving teaching, and providing information about what has been done or achieved.' (Guidelines, p.53). Assessment involves encouraging students to move to higher levels of thinking, to move through simple comprehension to application, analysis, and synthesis where students can apply what they have learned to their experiences in their social and personal lives. It encompasses both the cognitive and affective domains.

Assessment will provide a range of strategies and activities to help young people demonstrate both their comprehension and application of the concepts to practical situations; to provide objective information that will assist decision making and improve the teaching and learning process and to provide feedback for students on the quality of their learning and understanding. The certificate examinations are only one element in the assessment of students' learning in RE. There are limits to what they can measure, for example, the syllabus tells us that assessment for certification purposes provides limited information about the last of these. (Syllabus, p.44). Classroom assessment is better suited to this purpose and should provide students with clear information about their achievement of the full range of outcomes, both cognitive and affective.

Another element in an assessment strategy for RE is the class test. Tests are commonly used in order to review student achievement with respect to a body of knowledge associated with sections of the RE course. However, they can also be used formatively, where test questions provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of particular concepts in practice or to tease out the implications of a particular viewpoint, for example.

Project work and the RE journal comprise a third element. These have the potential to give space to students to explore in depth a particular topic and to be catalysts for growth in thinking. There are other elements – practical course work, in-class presentations, discussions, action projects etc. all of which have the potential to develop students' thinking about many of the key concepts and their implications in their own lives. Through them, students can link what is taught and learned in the RE classroom with their own experience.

These are simply strategies or ways of monitoring student attainment – they do not specify what measures are being used, what criteria are being applied. We are familiar with using active verbs like 'describe', 'list', 'summarise' 'outline how', and 'distinguish between' to write outcome measures for the achievement of the knowledge, skills and understanding goals in the syllabus. If we are to take equally seriously its attitudinal goals, we need to find the language appropriate to constructing outcomes which measure their achievement.

### Appendix 3

#### Colloquium Paper 2 Students' Experiences of Junior Certificate Religious Education [Amy Cooke, Eimear Connick, Bronagh Dunne and Shauna Holohan, Presentation Secondary School, Loughboy, Kilkenny]

##### Paper (1) Amy Cooke:

- My name is Amy and I am here today to talk about my favourite section of the Junior Certificate RE course which was section F - The Moral Challenge.
- I enjoyed this section as it was helpful in everyday life. We are all making choices and in situations where our choices have serious consequences we find ourselves making moral decisions. Choosing between good and bad behaviour is something we do everyday from an early age and whether we know it or not we are making important moral decisions.
- Studying this section of our course made me more fully aware of the choices I am making or not making and it made me think more about my own behaviour.

- This section of the course also taught me to make decisions using the CHOICE method and how to link my religion into everyday life. The choice method involves the following:
  - Check out the facts- No-one should be asked to make a moral decision without knowing all the relevant facts.*
  - Have you understood the influences - It is Important to recognise the influences that are at work whether from inside or outside ourselves.*
  - Others can help, seek advice - It is very helpful to get another, truly impartial view of the situation.*
  - In quiet time examine your conscience/ask God for help: Conscience has a very important role to play, for people of faith praying for guidance is a vital step in making a decision.*
  - Choose what you think is right, after following the steps the choice may not be easier but it should be clearer.*
  - Evaluate the decision afterwards - experience is a valuable teacher so it is necessary afterwards to see how the decision worked out and to learn from experience.*
- Being faced with moral choices is something that people experience all through life, so learning to make moral decisions I feel is a vital part of growing up.
- From studying this section I also got a greater understanding of what level of moral maturity I am at now and also what level my peers are at. I learned how others can influence your opinions and how sometimes this can be a very negative aspect.
- There are many different sources of morality - Home and family, Friends and peers, Religion and Church, Society and state and emotions. In studying morality I could figure out which sources are the most relevant to me.
- I am glad to be aware of all these factors and I know it will help me in my own choices and decisions.
- I learned what it actually means to behave morally and to make moral choices. I now understand that are actions have consequences not only for ourselves but for others. For example the way we treat others has a consequence, if we treat someone with meanness that's the way others will see us and that's the type of person we will be known as.
- This awareness is an important and necessary part of moral maturity because it means that you have to think about what is important to you, what you value and what type of person you want to be.
- This part of the course is like a wake-up call to think about your actions and about the kind of person you are. Our text book had real life situations about stealing, bullying and lying where moral decisions had to be made and it was very interesting to discuss these in class and to see how peoples' opinions varied.
- In particular I enjoyed the section on morality because of all the real life situations we looked at. We tried to imagine what our moral decisions for those situations would be. This showed me that people approach moral questions from different angles - some will just do what they like or what is good for them, others will act out of fear, others will follow the crowd, some will follow their religious beliefs and others will want to do the right thing because of their inner convictions. Even in our own class it was surprising to see so many different moral choices that people can make. I hope in the future that my own decisions will be thoughtful and I will be clear about the factors influencing me.

#### Textbook

- The questions in the exam paper allow you to use your knowledge as well as your own opinion. However it was also difficult as you were unsure of what information was required and how much was needed to obtain full marks.
- I also feel the language of the questions in the exam was difficult - and indeed the course itself.
- In my opinion our textbook was an interesting read but was not suitable for exam purposes.
- The textbook was much too detailed and when it came to exam revision it was difficult to know what the key factors were in each section.
- It was not really based around the exam questions and although relevant to the topic did not link in with the exam papers.

That's my experience of this section of our RE course and I would like to thank everybody for listening to me today.

#### Paper (2) Eimear Connick

Hi. My name is Eimear. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience of the Junior Certificate Religious Education Course as a whole. For me, the highpoint of the course was undoubtedly my Journal Work assignment. For this, I chose to undertake the title, 'A Study of what two of Jesus' Miracles show about the Kingdom of God,' – a title which was both challenging and inspiring as I went on to find.

First and foremost, I was challenged to try and think like Jesus in order to fully grasp his portrayal of the Kingdom of God. Also, I was surprised on looking back over the miracles I thought I knew so well. In actual fact, I came to the realisation that I had previously only skimmed the surface of what these miracles had to offer. I was instantly drawn to the awe-inspiring depth of metaphorical value held within the words of Jesus and I learned that it was one thing to read a story, but another thing altogether to fully appreciate the essence within. It was sobering to fully realise the implications of these metaphors in the modern world. For example, in the miracle of the Wedding at Cana, Jesus gives the wedding party an abundance of fresh wine. The wine represents the love which exists within Jesus and his Kingdom. Therefore, we learn that Jesus' love to us is pure and in abundance. This, I feel is but one important lesson held within the miracle, a lesson which, if re-enacted by society today, would provide a solid foundation for a loving and peaceful future.

Through my Journal Work, I found the opportunity to set out exactly what I believed in and thus strengthened my relationship with God and his Kingdom. In this way, the course helped me in my search for faith and allowed me to gain a greater insight into myself as a person. I gained a greater insight into the work of God in society today and into his presence in my own life. Also, I found myself inspired to fully integrate my Christian faith and morals into my relationships and understanding of others. This can be seen in my improved relationships with others as I now take the time to stop and think about how my actions will affect people around me.

The course as a whole encouraged me to change the way I think and my attitude towards life. Coming from a family with very set views and opinions I would not have been prepared to acknowledge the beliefs and traditions of other faiths had I not undertaken this course. In this way, I feel my heart was opened to change and that I have been given a more rounded view of my religion and on life as a whole.

One of the most interesting sections of the course for me was the interaction between morality and the laws which govern a state. I gained a greater knowledge and insight into how both of the above can come into conflict with each other through exploring different instances such as the German Nazi Government which ruled from 1932-1945. Here, a vendetta was raised against the Jewish race. In most cases, the moral thing to do would be to include everyone in the society, however, the laws set out by Hitler and the Nazis did not allow for this moral action. This was a real eye-opener for me as I was raised in the belief that the law and rules in general are there for our own good. Therefore, it was shock to my system when I discovered that this was not the case in many circumstances.

One story which stood out to me in this regard was the moving tale of Franz Jaegerstaetter, an Austrian who refused to contribute to the German war effort due to his Christian morals. To me, he epitomized the struggle with faith which each of us must experience and portrayed the courage which defined his faith in God and his Kingdom.

Despite the numerous positive aspects of this course, it also presented many challenges for me as a person.

In the first instance, I felt that I was challenged to experience life from others points of view and to accept that there are different beliefs in the world to my own Christian faith. This was difficult for me as a person as I was naturally very narrow minded and was forced to think in a lateral manner.

Secondly, I feel that the biggest challenge of all was to look inside myself and figure out what exactly I did believe in. In this way I was challenged in both my faith and in my morals. Through looking at other faiths, I was forced to ask myself: "Do I really believe in the Christian faith?" For me the answer to this was 'yes' but this may not be the case for others. Therefore this is I feel is a vital part of the course as a whole.

Furthermore, through studying morality I was forced to re-examine the moral principles which I held in life and found that I had to alter quite a few. This, although one of the greatest challenges I had ever encountered, was extremely beneficial to my development into the person I am today – a person mature in both my faith and morals.

Finally, in relation to the weeks prior to my Junior Certificate examinations, I found that the extra subject put a lot of additional pressure on me and I felt very apprehensive about the exam itself. Looking back on past exam papers I really couldn't pinpoint any area which required more study than the others and due to the massive content of the course, I found that studying for Religious Education had a severe impact on the time I had available to me to study the other subjects at hand. I felt that in each of the five Sections of the course there was a lot of material to get through. Therefore, one of the recommendations that I would make would be to reduce the content in each section of the course as this would leave us more time to reflect on the issues and topics at hand within each section and to discuss them together as a class.

I found it difficult to control my time management in the exam. This, coupled with the difficult questions on the paper itself contributed to my overall negative experience of the Junior Certificate Religious Education exam.

Also in relation to the exam, I feel that there should be more room for personal reflection rather than awarding marks purely for factual content. I felt I was restricted in terms of the choice of questions I had available to me in the exam.

In all, the course was challenging in many aspects, but this for the most part had a very positive affect on me as a person. Religious Education is a subject at which you must work but which offers a great sense of fulfilment at its closing.

Thank you for listening to me today and I hope my comments have been helpful to you.

### **Paper (3) Bronagh Dunne:**

A Section which I found very interesting was Section D a 'Question of Faith'. I could relate to some of these faith questions because I have asked myself these faith questions also. Questions like 'What is the purpose of life?' 'Why was I born?' 'Where can happiness be found?' Learning that people have asked and tried to answer these questions since the beginning of time is fascinating and consoling also -I am not alone.

From studying this section I now notice how modern pop singers question faith through songs like John Lennon's 'Imagine'. Even though I learned to identify how this song has a Secularist Humanist view of the world. I admire the honesty of Lennon in putting down his views in this song. Also in the song 'Why does it always rain on me?' The singer feels like he is being punished for lying as he says 'Why does it always rain on me is it because I lied when I was seventeen?' This song reminds of the Jewish psalms and hymns. Again my course helped me to see that the image of vengeful, punishing God and is a negative image of God.

I found that I could relate to a lot of the subjects in this section such as stages of faith. As a child I was brought to mass and thought to say prayers but I never actually put much thought into my faith – I was just going with the flow. As a teenager I began to question my faith some of the time while at other times I would just fall into apathy and tempted to stay at home from mass to have a lie in or watch television. However when I talk to my granny, I know she has reached a mature faith as she can say 'this is what I believe' and stand by her beliefs. Although I haven't reached that stage yet I am starting to learn more and to have faith that I can and will workout my own individual

answers to the Question of Faith. I hope to continue on in my faith journey opening myself to the mystery and presence of God.

From studying Junior Certificate RE I know that if I am to reach the stage a personal and mature faith then I have to understand what my own image of God has come from. When I look at how the image of God is portrayed in the Simpsons and in other programmes where God presented as this old man in the sky who fixes everything I know that this is a childish image of which will not work for me as I grow older. Listening to some of my friends I find myself thinking about the image of God they hold and the stage of faith they are at. I would never been able to think like that or to notice this if I had not done this course.

#### **Paper (4) Shauna Holohan:**

Hello, my name is Shauna and today I would like to talk to you about the Junior Cert R.E. course which I completed in 2009. I will be talking in particular today about the world religion which I studied in Section C – Judaism.

I felt that the history of Judaism was the most challenging part of the course because of the factual content which consisted of a lot of difficult names of kings and prophets. These had to be learned and this was a lot of hard work. Also, learning the names of the religious texts, i.e. the Tanakh and its books...and also the oral Torah was a lot of memory work.

However I came to realise that it was very important to know this history so as to understand the story of the Jewish people. The Jewish festivals and rituals are linked into their history. I think this study gave me a better understanding into the foundations of my own religion as I can see that the traditions and festivals of the Jewish faith have aspects in common with my own.

Studying Judaism in such detail gave me a better understanding of what life would have been like for Jesus: as a Jewish boy who had his Bar Mizvah and who wore the tallit, tefillin and kippah - as a guest at the Jewish wedding at Cana, as a Rabbi who knew his Torah and preached in synagogues... I wonder did his house in Nazareth have a Mezuzah on the doorpost, as I knew he prayed the Shema prayer.

I can now also imagine Jesus, who was appalled at the dishonour shown by the Sadducees to the Sacred Temple in Jerusalem and how he was so annoyed at them for turning this sacred place into a money-making scheme.

Learning about the cleansing of the Temple gave me a better understanding of Jesus. It showed me how strongly and passionately he felt about his religion to react in such a way. This also helped me to relate to Jesus as a human being. I admired the way he too was prepared to lose his cool for something he really believed in: his FAITH!! One of the lessons of this story for me was that sometimes it's important for me to stand up for what I believe in, particularly when it comes to my faith. Like our teacher used to say..."If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything"!

For my journal I studied the lives of the Pharisees in detail. Although I found this information very hard to source, I think it really helped me in the end because for my long questions in the written exam I was able to write about the Pharisees.

I thought that learning about the Jewish traditions and festivals was very enjoyable. I loved learning about Pesach and how there is a historical context for this meal and each item of food on the Seder plate has historical significance to the Passover story. For example, the bitter herbs recall the bitterness of slavery.

I now also understand kosher food and how it limits modern Jewish people. The rules about kosher food come from the Torah, and Jewish people obey them as an act of obedience to God. This also helped me to appreciate the freedom I have as a Christian and thankfully I don't have to have two separate fridges and sinks in my kitchen!

Finally I learned that Jesus can be seen as a prophet in the long line of historical prophets of the Jewish faith. I now understand what 'Messiah' means when I use it in relation to Jesus. St. Peter and the other disciples were certain that Jesus was the Messiah promised throughout the Old Testament. In the early Church when preaching to the Jewish people the disciples used the Jewish scriptures and prophecies to prove logically that Jesus was the Messiah, the descendant of King David promised by God and foretold by many of their prophets.

Because of my study of Judaism I can now relate to Jesus as a person and I am also better able to understand the importance of recognising Jesus as the Messiah. This gives me a fuller picture of Jesus which also gave me a stronger belief as a Catholic. One reason this is so important is because it shows that R.E. is not just about learning off loads of facts for an exam but it actually helps me to grow in my faith – a process which my teacher also helped me in.

Without the knowledge I gained in this section on Judaism my picture of Jesus would be much more limited. I have come to understand who Jesus was in terms of his family, his culture, his faith and his customs and traditions. This also gives me a better picture of Jesus as a person born into a Jewish family.

Finally, I want to say that studying Religious Education for the Junior Cert. - although hard work - was entirely worthwhile in the end.

I hope that listening to my experience helps you.

## Colloquium Paper 3 - The Challenge to be Inclusive in a Multi-Faith R.E. Classroom [Mary Duff, RE Teacher, Beaufort College, Navan]

## 1. A Multi- Faith RE Classroom in a Multi-faith school

- Description of the school including statistics
- VEC school with DEIS strand one status
- 40% international population
- 20% special education needs population
- 10% Traveller population
- Constantly evolving school population which reflects Irish life in the past 10 years
- Diverse population - diverse nationally ethnically socially culturally socioeconomically academically and ..... religiously including other belief systems!!
- Stats on Religious/non religious affiliation
- So how does RE work in this context?

## 2. The teacher in the Multi-faith RE classroom

- It's a huge challenge or at least I found it to be so.
- Teacher identity - A catechist, a religious educator or both? And what does all that mean?
- What does the school policy say? What does the diocese say? What does the state say? What do parents say? What do your colleges with- in the RE department say? What do other colleagues say? What do students say? How does the relationship between any one or more of these factors combined impact on the Multi faith RE classroom. How many of these questions are relevant to me?
- Teacher aims – What's happening in your classroom? Catechises Religious Education, Ecumenism, Interfaith Dialogue, conversations between people of faith and those of none or a combination of the above?. And is it correct to say people of no faith? Can you do all this in 40mins three times a week? Is it possible? Is it aspirational?

## 3. The Students in the Multi-faith Classroom

- What's happening for them? Catechises religious education ecumenism interfaith dialogue conversing with those of other belief systems and/or a combination of the above. All through the study of religious education as an exam subject and as a non exam subject.
- Conversations that begin with "Miss in My country we..." Conversions involving practising and non practising Catholic students from Poland and Lithuania with practising and non practising Catholic students from Ireland, between practising Muslims of Asian descent born in Ireland with practising Muslims from Nigeria. Evangelical and Orthodox Christians as well as many others listen too to the topic of the day.

## 4. The Challenges

- Our Multi faith classrooms are often multinational and with that language difficulties. Not exclusive to RE. English not a first language.
- Our multi faith classrooms often contain young people with learning difficulties. Not exclusive to RE.
- Our Multi faith classrooms also contain students whose parents have exercised their constitutional right that their child does not participate in Religious Education. Why? Survivors of religious persecution in European conflicts or conflicts of other kinds.
- School identity issues. As a VEC school are we a Catholic school/Multi-denominational/non denominational? What exactly does any of this mean? Why don't I know the answer to this question? What's the policy? What's the reality?
- How do parents feel about what's going on? (Sample of parent opinions from recent survey)
- How are established and new faith communities responding? Supportive? Struggling for recognition or threatened by change
- The challenges are about change. But how can this change be managed by schools for the benefit of the school community, wider community and education itself.
- How is the state responding in terms of the development of the exam syllabus and the training of RE teachers to meet these changes?

## 5. The Opportunities – Drawn from above

- Catechesis
- Religious education academic recognition and accreditation
- Ecumenism
- Interfaith dialogue
- Conversions between people of faith and those of none.
- Personal spiritual development
- Cross curricular links (History/CSPE/Geography/Home Ec/etc...
- Academic achievement ( Our school statistics on this)
- Promotion of improved community relationships /tolerance
- Are we at a crossroads of sorts in the Religious Education World? Can we answer these questions? What happens if we get the answers right? Can we afford to get this wrong?

**Thanks**

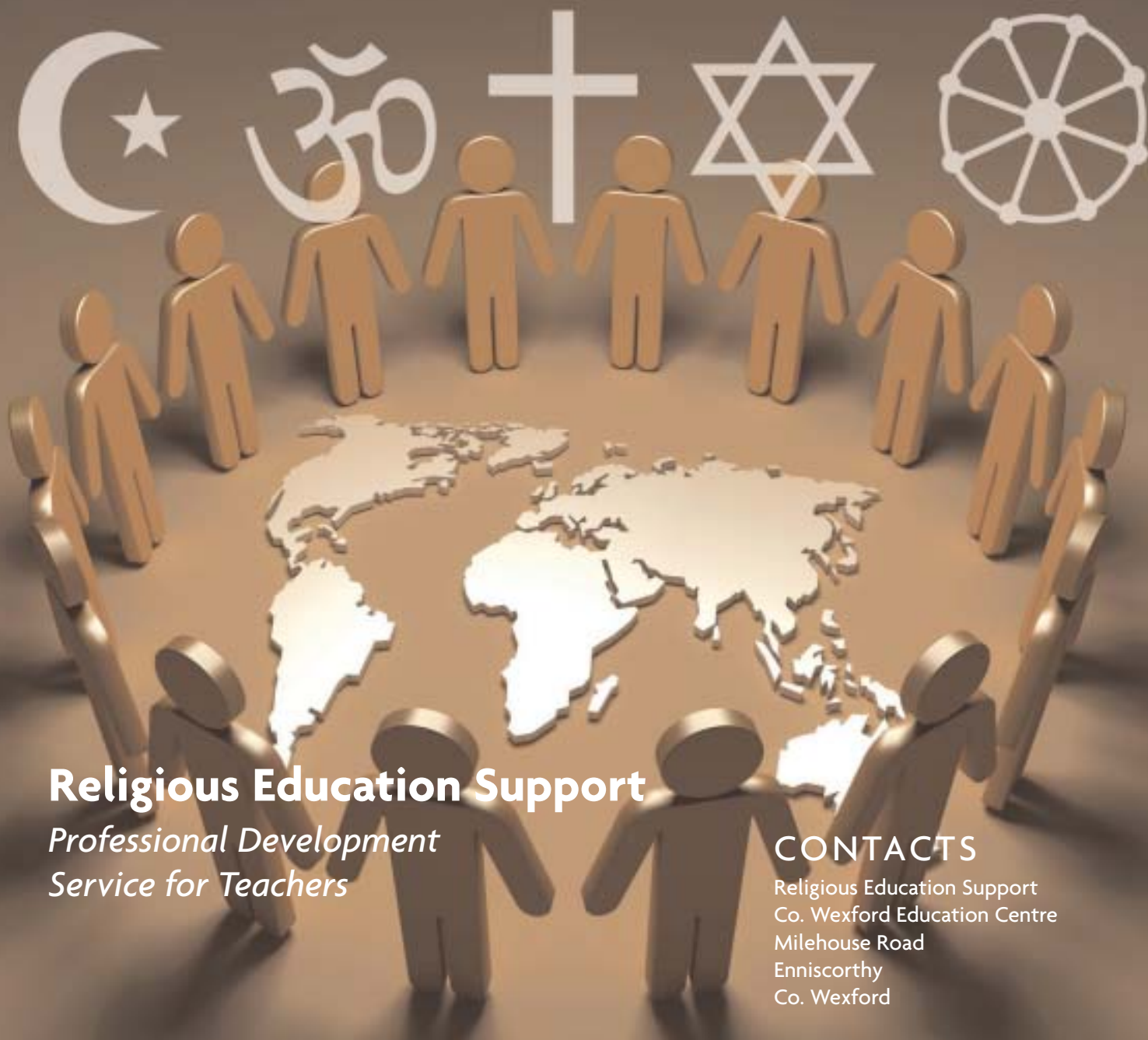
*Sincere thanks to those who presented papers and shared their insights at this colloquium – Suzanne Dillon, Mary Duff and the four students from Presentation Secondary School, Knockbeg, Kilkenny.*

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*It is hoped that the dissemination of this report will encourage further discussion and that a similar follow -up event may be hosted in the 2010-2011 academic year.*

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